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PLAY

NO.1 FOR PS5

PS PORTAL

PLAYSTATION'S NEW HANDHELD: IS IT WORTH £199?

ISSUE 35
JANUARY 2024
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STAR WARS OUTLAWS

TEKKEN 8

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

THE ALTERS

80 NEW GAMES INSIDE

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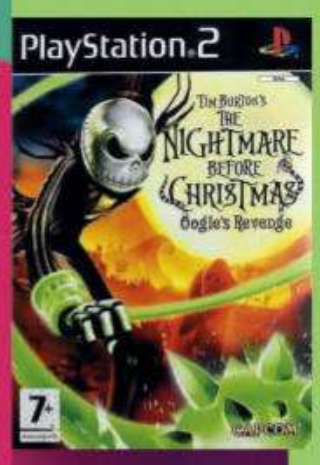

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Welcome

Hello friend! We're meeting at the boundary – between 2023 and 2024. What better time to bring you a preview special, digging into a year ahead that's looks like being packed with some extremely interesting games? It might not be non-stop blockbusting, but in a way that's all the better. There are new favourites to meet.

Perhaps that'll be Crow Country (p28), a positively creeptastic PS1 throwback survival horror from the Tangle Tower devs, who we have a natter with all about it. Or maybe Ys X: Nordics (p38), which from our hands-on we know is shaping up to be a great jumping on point for those new to the RPG series, with slick, combo-based combat… and boats!

There are some big hitters as well! Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth's (p42) dual protagonists are on the cover for a reason. We're excited for the huge adventure to drop in January, and have spent plenty of time getting to grips with the game for ourselves and exploring Hawaii, as well as chatting with the game's chief producer, Hiroyuki Sakamoto, about Kiryu's return.

Dragon's Dogma 2's (p62) scale, meanwhile, is almost unprecedented when you factor in the sense of adventure and freedom. We speak with director Hideaki Itsuno about the series' comeback after 12 years, and how to balance grounded fantasy with slapstick humour.

We're not just looking ahead, though. We also spend lots of time testing PlayStation Portal (p6), Sony's new Remote Play handheld, and give you the lowdown on whether the £200 is worth it. Plus, we look back at the infamous PS2 collectathon Dog's Life (p108) and deliver expert verdicts on the big releases, including Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare III (p70), Persona 5 Tactica (p84), EA Sports WRC (p81), RoboCop: Rogue City (p94), and loads more!

We hope you have a great time reading all about it. This big 2024 preview is just the beginning of plenty of coverage to come. The future of gaming is certainly looking interesting, so join us for the ride!

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Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
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GAME OF THE MONTH
World Of Horror
BEST CRIMINAL
Dr. Eggman (Sonic)

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THIS MONTH'S BLOCKBUSTER BUDDIES

Malindy Hetfeld
CONTRIBUTOR
Reporting live from Sotenbori, she's got the scoop on Like A Dragon's street fights, from spin kicks to… rocket shoes?

GAME OF THE MONTH
Jusant
BEST CRIMINAL
Kefka (Final Fantasy VI)

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
Raise your spyglasses toward the River Avon and you may see Jess sailing the SS FF, getting a bit too into Dawntrail.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Thirsty Suitors
BEST CRIMINAL
Goro Majima (Yakuza)

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Working on Edge as well as PLAY, Mim could use The Alters' cloning tech – and the nifty jumpsuits too.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Little Goody Two Shoes
BEST CRIMINAL
Tommy Vercetti (GTA Vice City)

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
You can't show PS Portal with screenshots, so it's photoshoot time to show it off. Who needs Peter Parker?

GAME OF THE MONTH
Jusant
BEST CRIMINAL
The Joker (Batman AA)

Ryan Robbins
DESIGNER
Taking off in his Stanisław Lem ship to focus on Planet Edge, we've had a blast having Ryan on the team this year!

GAME OF THE MONTH
The Invincible
BEST CRIMINAL
Sigismund Dijkstra (Witcher)

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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

As ergonomic and pleasing to game on as your home TV setup (and lighter than you might think).

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Need an end-of-year treat? We've got you!

This year's definitive PS5 big telly experience can now be played on the small(er) screen.

Jumping into the PlayStation Portal

Sony's new Remote Play handheld is built of the right stuff, but is the idea sound?

Sure, we all thought PS Portal looked a little odd when it was announced; the Remote Play handheld resembled a big screen wedged between a bisected DualSense, after all. And while it's just as odd to look at when we unbox it, it begins to make sense when we hold it. It feels just as ergonomic and pleasing to game on as your home TV setup (and it's lighter than you might think).

As you'd expect from PlayStation's hardware designers, PS Portal is a lovely bit of kit. While a lot of that is down to the the DualSense's impeccable design (though the handles are a little shorter here), the LCD screen is nothing to sniff at. It may be a little shiny and prone to picking up smeary fingerprints, but the picture quality is nice and vibrant, shown off when you boot it up via slick menus that play into the 'portal' theming (when you connect to your console it flies into frame through a circular hole). Some users, especially original-model PS Vita defenders (we're with you) may baulk at the lack of OLED here, but it feels swish.

For the most part, setting up is simple: you connect to WiFi (it's required due to the Remote-Play-only premise), and are asked to link to a specific PS5. It's easy enough to switch between multiple consoles if, like us, you bounce between a few. All that's left is to push ⊗ and, fingers crossed, your PS5 will boot up from rest mode, become fully controllable from your PS Portal, and allow you to play just as you would in front of the TV but with a screen between your hands.

THE LOOKING GLASS

Which isn't to say we've enjoyed a completely problem-free experience with our Portal so far. At one point the controls stopped working when we connected (solved by disconnecting completely and hopping back in), and it noticeably performs best while on the same WiFi network as our PS5, and best of all when the PS5 itself is wired up to the router. You're meant to be able to go from WiFi point to WiFi point, for example hotspotting with your phone, but we to date haven't been able to make that work, and when there's a failed connection the system itself gives you very little feedback as to just what might have gone awry.

Our Portal noticeably performs best while on the same WiFi network as our PS5.

Plus, as anyone who has dealt with home internet is aware, sometimes your internet connection just gets a bit wonky. The problem with remote streaming games is that when you get input latency or resolution dips it can be very obvious. By its nature, PS Portal is a device that feels natural only under perfect conditions, with anything less than perfection being

The shape looks a bit strange, but in the hands it feels right to play on.

NO CLOUDS

PS Portal is Remote-Play-only, meaning streaming from PlayStation's servers isn't an option, despite the PS5 Streaming service launch back in Oct. It feels like a missed opportunity that the handheld completely lacks support for the new venture.

especially noticeable – though that's just game streaming for you.

Because when it is working well, there's something magical about being sucked into gaming worlds from wherever you want around the house (ideally snug under blankets with cocoa). Horizon Forbidden West's DLC in bed? Carving through Devil May Cry V's demons while you stand in the window of your Gothic manor? It's all possible, and it feels best when you're not reminded of the limits of streaming.

Somewhat ironically, though, you notice those limits far more easily with some of these high-end games. The more detailed a game's graphics are, the more you'll notice issues when, say, Horizon's grass is swaying but in a blurry and choppy way. Most of the time you'll get over it, but if your internet is having a moment you notice dropped inputs very, very quickly.

While we enjoy swinging around Spider-Man 2's NYC on our Portal, slower-paced games suit the device best. Persona 5 Tactica's turn-based missions feel made for handheld, and interacting with Goodbye Volcano High's story replicates the vibe of cosying up with a Netflix series on, say, your phone.

ALL PLAY

We should point out that not much about PS Portal is completely new. Sure, the controller means haptics and trigger effects remain intact. Otherwise, we've already been using Remote Play via other means; there are official and third-party smartphone and tablet apps that perform just as well, and the same for laptops and PCs too. Even SteamDeck can run PC-based PS Remote Play, fitting within the PlayStation ecosystem already. Not to mention if you want to free up the TV, you could (and we do) just move the PS5 to a different screen in the house – it's not uncommon to have more than one.

Along similar lines, those other solutions can do more than *only* Remote Play. There's an incredibly odd moment when we test Ape Academy, grumbling about the lag in the juggling minigame when we realise we are streaming a PSP game to a £200 proprietary device. We may as well pick up our PS Vita instead.

Other than the haptics, PS Portal doesn't seem to perform noticeably better than other methods tested on the same connection (and at times our smartphone seems a little snappier). While there's certainly an appeal to the hardware itself (we're yearning for something similar that'd actually let us download games, but we are PS Vita lovers, after all), it's incredibly niche for such a high-end price. It's not really solving a new problem, it's just providing *one* very expensive and very specific solution to a problem that's already been addressed. It's not a revolution in Remote Play technology, it's just a nice little device that you probably don't need, and just one of many ways to keep gaming when your family wants to watch NCIS instead of you failing at Elden Ring.

*** PS Portal is out now (and low in stock) for a hefty £199.99.**

There's something magical about being sucked into gaming worlds from wherever you want around the house.

Reading your issue of PLAY at the same time as gaming is now more possible than it's ever been before.

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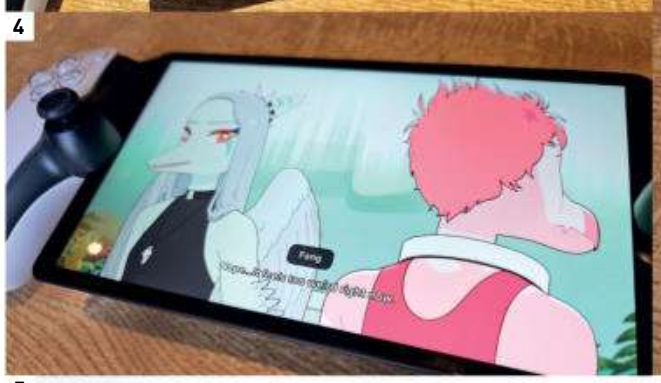

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5

1 Turn-based games like Persona 5 Tactica work well on Portal as they're less reliant on quick inputs. **2** There's a real rush to playing a traditionally home console experience like GTA V on a handheld. **3** When it works well, playing Horizon Forbidden West is mind blowing. When it's not... it's a bit annoying, frankly. **4** Bold colours and cartoon designs like in Goodbye Volcano High hold up best when your connection struggles (the more detailed a game's visuals – the more obvious any issues). **5** There's definitely a premium feel to the PlayStation Portal. Sony knows how to make really good hardware. But we still wish there was more to it.

OCEAN OF ACCOLADES
Alan Wake 2 won the Critics' Choice award, as voted by journalists on Team PLAY as well as sister publications PC Gamer, Edge, Retro Gamer, and GamesRadar. It got a Gold 9/10 from us last issue, and it's definitely not hard to see why.

PlayStation voices
The month in mouthing off

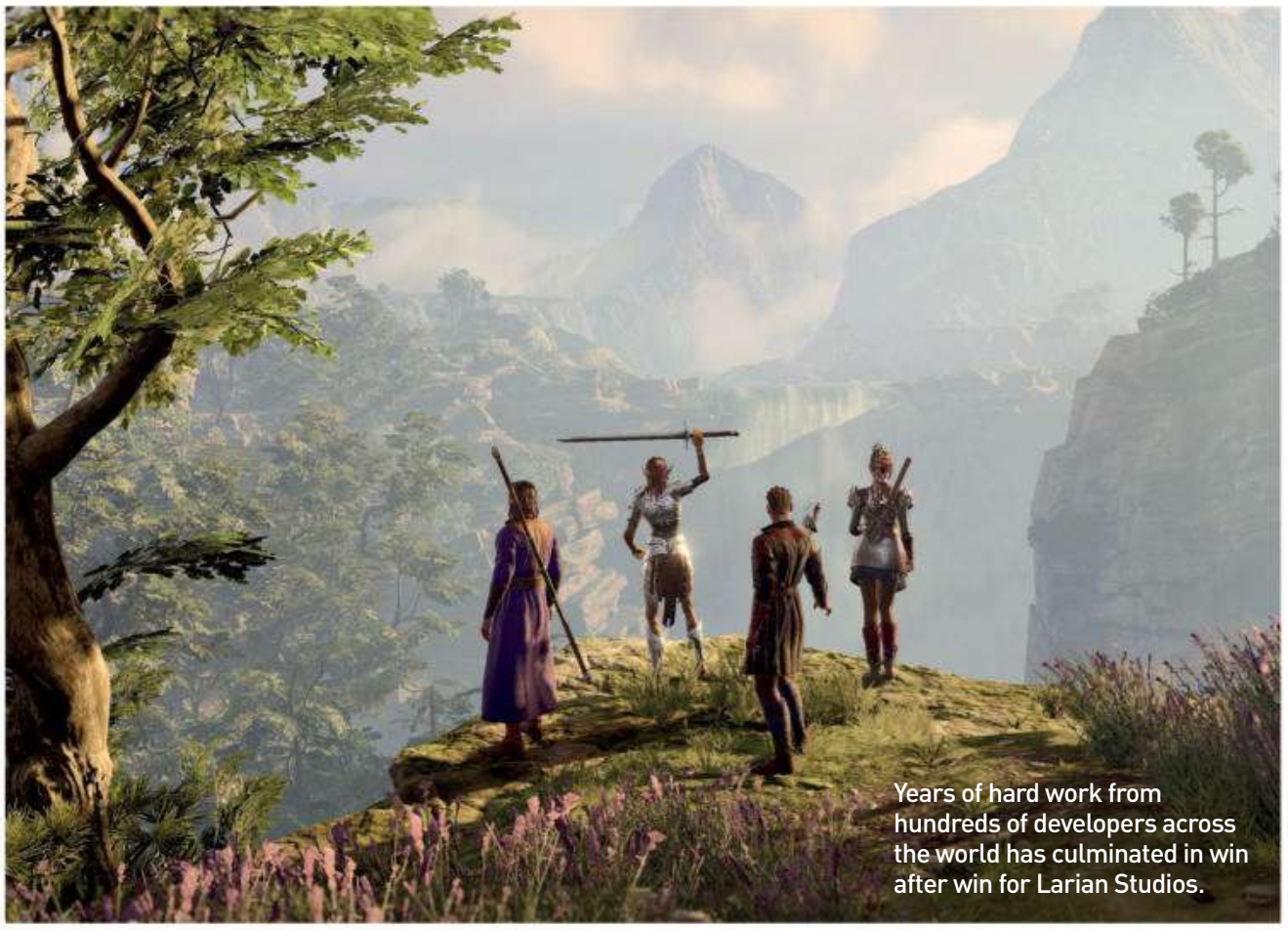
"THERE WAS A MOMENT IN BRINK'S DEVELOPMENT WHERE PLAYER SPEEDS WERE FAST AND FUN. [...] I WAS ADVISED TO SLOW THINGS DOWN. IF I COULD GO BACK, I FEEL LIKE I WOULD HAVE NOT TAKEN THE FEEDBACK AS A DIRECT ORDER." TECHNICAL DESIGNER AUBREY HESSELGREN.

"THE DARK WORLD, ALL THOSE POWERS YOU CAN HAVE – SAME FOR CYBERPUNK." CYBERPUNK 2077'S QUEST DIRECTOR PAWEL SASKO TELLS NEON ARCADE ABOUT HIS LOVE OF THE VAMPIRE TTRPG.

"WHAT'S IT LIKE TO WORK TOGETHER? WELL, HE COMPLAINS – A LOT." FFVII REBIRTH'S YOSHINORI KITASE JOKES ABOUT HIS REUNION WITH TETSUYA NOMURA IN THE GUARDIAN.

Critical success

Baldur's Gate 3 sweeps Golden Joysticks, earning an armful of glittering awards



Years of hard work from hundreds of developers across the world has culminated in win after win for Larian Studios.

Following three years of totally digital awards shows, the Golden Joystick Awards returned to in-person form this year at the Royal Lancaster Hotel in London. Hosted by prolific performer Troy Baker, it was a night of massive wins – with only a few technical issues and a very merry crowd betraying any sense of the event being out of practice.

A record number of votes from the public meant history-making wins for certain high rollers. The heaviest hitter was Baldur's Gate 3, a crunchy RPG that somehow manages to bottle the lightning of your most electric Dungeons & Dragons sessions. Cleaning house at this year's Joysticks, it picked up wins across seven different categories, and achieved a feat no other game has managed in the awards show's 41-year history.

REWARDING EXPERIENCE

The game took the top spot in Best Storytelling, and netted Ultimate Game Of The Year. (It's a PLAY 10/10 for a reason.) Actor Neil Newbon also picked up Best Supporting Performer for his turn as everyone's favourite haughty elf, Astarion, delivering a heartfelt thank you both in and out of character during his acceptance speech.

While Larian CEO Swen Vincke was seen fleeing the scene with an armful of awards, Baldur's Gate 3 didn't win all the headlining trophies. Capcom's remake of Resident Evil 4 scooped up PlayStation Game Of The Year, and the other big winner was Final Fantasy XVI. Smashing together choir chanting and full-throated rock songs, its eclectic soundtrack impressed the judges to the tune of a Best Audio win. On top of that, before the night was out actor Ben Starr picked up Best Lead Performer for his passionate portrayal of Final Fantasy XVI's lead character Clive Rosfield.

And as this was an in-person ceremony, people dressed up for the occasion – often with a videogaming twist. Starr wowed everyone not only with his acting chops but also his choice of favourite series entry; the Final Fantasy VIII logo was emblazoned across the front of Starr's awards show 'fit, stylishly co-ordinated with an orange velvet suit. Do you reckon it's a look we could pull off? Well, don't know until we try... next year!

*** Awards season isn't over! Read PLAY's Game Of The Year awards next issue.**

Once more, with 4K

The Last Of Us Part II will finally make its PS5 debut

Kicking off the new year on 19 January, The Last Of Us Part II Remastered will be launching on PS5. Better yet, if you already own the game on PS4, it'll only cost you a tenner to upgrade digitally.

In addition to the expected 4K update to a game that already looked smashing on PS4 back in 2020, Remastered offers more than a little bit extra. The first big addition is a roguelike mode called No Return, offering a slew of newly playable characters. In it, you'll fight through a series of randomised combat encounters, survival-style. As you experiment with playstyle, loadouts, and more over the course of many runs through its 12 levels, you can unlock additional characters and skins, and even edge out the competition on the global leaderboards if you're good enough.

There's also the opportunity to soak up behind-the-scenes insight. Besides developer commentary, there are the Lost Levels – content otherwise cut from the game early in development, now made playable for the first time. Unique, and a peek behind the curtain that definitely piques our interest, we wouldn't mind seeing other developers try something similar for their definitive releases.

Aforementioned additions and bonuses like new costumes aside, the original PS4 release was already technically breathtaking; do we really need this remaster so soon after? Given the debut of the television series earlier this year (and the rumours of a third game that never really go away), the obvious joke is right there, and we're definitely not above making it: looks like we'll never see the last of this series.

The Last Of Us Part II Remastered will launch on PS5 on 19 January.

> The first big addition is a roguelike mode called No Return, offering a slew of newly playable characters.

Cute date idea: set yourselves up side by side with the PS5 and PS4 versions and play spot the difference.

DEV ACCESS

Growing a backbone

Nekki's Dmitry Pimenov on how you're being empowered in cyberpunk superhero beat-'em-up **Spine**

We're big fans of action movies," says Dmitry Pimenov, Nekki COO and Spine producer, when we ask about the studio's shift from making mobile fighting games (it's responsible for the Shadow Fight series) to its new console and PC single-player character action brawler. "We were thinking a lot about gun-fu movies, from Equilibrium and John Woo to John Wick and The Matrix and everything," he continues.

It's not often that devs bring up Equilibrium (the infamous 2002 flick starring Christian Bale and Sean Bean – which is well worth an inebriated watch). But watching early footage, we can see it. Protagonist Redline dishes out high kicks to the face, dodges by launching into a horizontal spin, sprays graffiti in security guards' faces for good measure, and, of course, shoots hot lead from her pistols between all that.

The world is a cyberpunk, hyper-capitalist one, complete with downtrodden populace. But the team want you to feel more than empowered to fight back as street artist action hero Redline, describing the game to us as 'superhero cyberpunk'. The rhythmic fighting system is, they say, influenced by Insomniac's Spider-Man games. Redline even gets a spider-sense-like warning when she's about to get hit, which comes courtesy of Spine – a kind of sentient augmentation to her nervous system that enhances her reflexes and marks points of interest, such as stylishly highlighting enemy spawn points (we've yet to know if they're sassy, though).

> **We were thinking a lot about gun-fu movies, from Equilibrium and John Woo to John Wick.**

The idea is to use this dynamic to allow Redline to pull off impressive combos, but also larger-than-life action set-pieces, like jumping out of tall buildings. "We want our character to be able to do all kinds of cool moves like dodging bullets and parrying them with katana," says Pimenov. That's aided by some great animation, which Pimenov says has always been a focus for Nekki. The studio even has its own animation software, Cascadeur. It's a throughline from Shadow Fight all the way to Spine. "I'd say that almost all of our games are about these animations," says Pimenov. While what we see is still early in development, what's there looks to be slick and satisfying as Redline whacks her way through legions of enemies (the focus is on managing large-scale fights rather than one-on-one duels – though boss fights will feature in some missions).

TRIGGER HAPPY

The team are conscious of wanting to capitalise on this fast-paced action with impactful animations, and their solution goes back to their shared love of action movies (they watch them together over and over): they've hired a director of photography who has worked in cinema.

"We think there's a lot of features of real camera work which haven't been ever implemented in games, and we want to try that," says Pimenov. He breaks the camera down beyond the standard, controllable camera into four pillars: cutscene direction; finisher moves; preset cameras (we see one action scene go side-on as Redline bashes across a bridge, and another go top-down in an apartment like, Pimenov says, Hotline Miami or John Wick 4); and what Pimenov calls an "intellectual camera system".

We've yet to see this in action, but Pimenov likens it to the moment in Uncharted 4's opening when the camera will cut in on Nathan Drake beating up one particular attacker. But the idea is to be totally dynamic. If you don't touch the camera's controls it'll pick the best angles for showcasing whatever's happening. It might sound like a gimmick, but for the less gaming-savvy full camera control can sometimes be a hindrance. This should help with that while also delivering a cinematic experience, showing wide shots when you're surrounded, then zeroing in when you get down to the last guy.

The dense sprawl of the lower city, which you'll fight through, is based on Kowloon.

It's an ambitious idea, but clearly key to the vision: "That's where we want to put our resources," says Pimenov. The director of photography will apparently advise on where he'd want the camera to be in a variety of situations, and the team will extract the thinking into code that can make those decisions as situations arise (rather than being pre-baked). Through a currently early bar brawl the team light up as they describe all the areas of the scrap where they hope to use this to full effect – smashing dudes into the bar itself, chairs flying, and then trading furious blows on the dancefloor. We look forward to seeing the final framing.

Spine is planned for release no earlier than 2025 on PS5. Watch this space!

1 Finishing moves are one part of Spine's camera system. 2 There's a divide between the city's upper and lower classes. 3 This government building will be a bit less pristine by the time Redline is through.

Redline's enhanced weapon skills are inspired by the action in gun-fu movies.

GEAR: STUFF WE LOVE

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RIG 600 PRO HS HEADSET

NACON €99.90 NACONGAMING.COM

These wireless headphones have got you covered thanks to cushions crafted from breathable fabric and 40mm speakers, offering well-balanced audio in comfort. Rather than adjusting the headband for size, you click the earcups in and out of place. It may take some getting used to but, like the tuck-away design of the attached microphone, it makes sense.

SCUF REFLEX PS5 CONTROLLER

SCUF £199.99 SCUFGAMING.COM

Yes, we all love our DualSenses but there'll always be those longing for a luxe experience. The Reflex covers a lot of the same ground as PlayStation's own Edge controller, with remappable back paddles and easy-to-replace thumbsticks. But on top of the traditional white and black looks, Scuf offers extra colourways, from iridescent to galaxy.

REVOLUTION 5 PRO CONTROLLER

NACON €229.90 NACONGAMING.COM

If you're tired of ergonomic curves and subtle texturing, the Revolution 5 Pro really gives you something to hold onto. Chunkier than many other options, this Nacon pad is rather sturdier too. Featuring magnetic Hall effect tech, the Revolution 5 Pro promises to be far less prone to the ever-infuriating controller curse of stick drift.

VICTRIX PRO BFG WIRELESS CONTROLLER

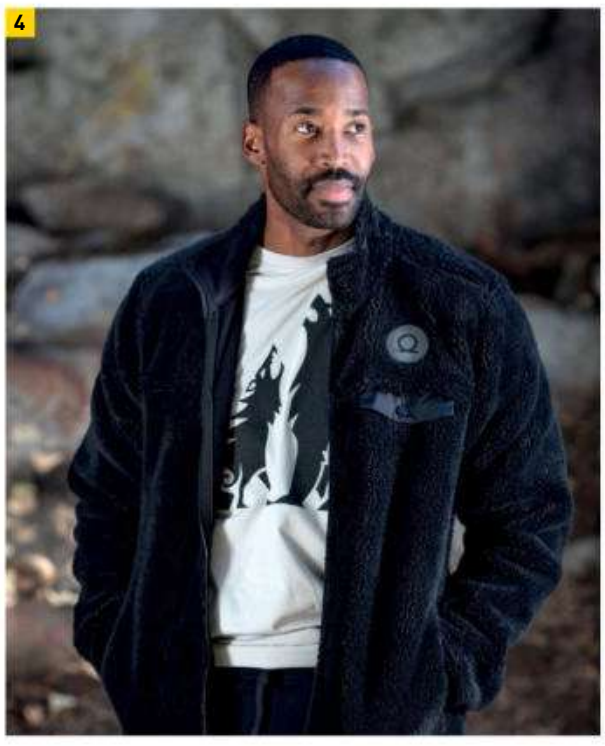
PDP $179.99 PDP.COM

We all know purple is the best colour, but this controller has more than those stylish violet accents going for it. Boasting a modular design, it offers a truly dizzying array of customisation options. If you'd rather not reach for the bulk of a fight stick at your next FGC tourney, this one's for you.

THROWING HANDS

If a fight stick is your weapon of choice, the Victrix Pro FS 12 might just be your Excalibur. $399.99 from PDP.com, it's definitely pricy but offers durability, comfort, and customisability.

'Tis the season to get cosy, and you'll hit the ground running in these 1 **Official Sonic The Hedgehog slippers** (£22.99, segashop.co.uk). Racing to get warm, throwing on this 2 **God Of War Odin blanket** (£34.99, insertcoinclothing.com) will see you scheming – or gaming – in comfort. To complete your this-is-my-plotting-face 'fit, suggest a direct line to Horizon's Sylens via this 3 **Focus Ear Cuff** (£75, gear.eu.playstation.com). Too cold to conspire? Don the 4 **God Of War Ragnarök StormTech Sherpa Fleece Jacket** (£149.94, gear.eu.playstation.com). To make up the layers underneath, pair this 5 **PlayStation Pride 2023 T-Shirt** (£29.95, gear.eu.playstation.com) with a 6 **The Last Of Us: Part II Ellie: Winter hoodie** (£49.99, insertcoinclothing.com).



JESS'S REAL DEAL

Listen, my Mum's made a list (and she's checking it twice) of all the things she wants to play this holiday season. Alas, it is an *extensive* list (she's got great taste in games), and my launch PS5 just hasn't the room for everything. For me, that's as good an excuse as any to finally upgrade my console's memory, and Seagate has just the thing. The Game Drive M.2 SSD for PS5 can expand your console's internal storage by up to 4TB, and is surprisingly easy to install. With a built-in heat sink to boot, Mum and I will be blazing through her lengthy playlist – provided we finally hit credits on Yakuza 0 first.

Available now, the 1TB model of Seagate's Game Drive M.2 SSD will set you back £72.99 from Amazon.

(MORE) STUFF WE LOVE

Figuring it out

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG NENDOROID

GOOD SMILE COMPANY £58.99 DEKAIANIME.COM

We love Nendoroid figures not just for their cuteness or expressive posing, but also for the fact they don't break the bank. Collecting figures can become an all-consuming hobby – like Doctor Eggman's quest for the Chaos Emeralds – but Nendoroids offer a perfect balance of quality and approachable price point.

METAL GEAR SOLID – SOLID SNAKE TUBBZ COSPLAYING DUCK COLLECTIBLE

NUMSKULL £14.99 AMAZON.CO.UK

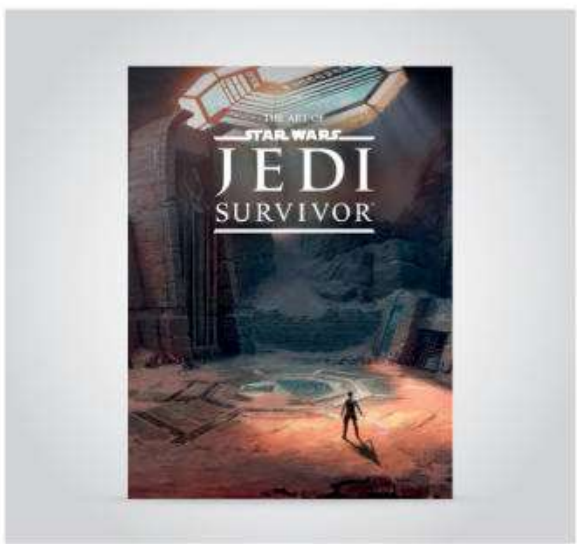
Yes, it's the joke that simply will not sink: cosplaying ducks. But look at little Solid Snake, with his furrowed brow and pouty duck bill. What's not quackers is that price point: this could be the perfect stocking filler for the stealth aficionado in your life.

FINAL FANTASY VII BRING ARTS ACTION FIGURE – AERITH GAINSBOROUGH

SQUARE ENIX £109.99
HTTPS://GB.STORE.SQUARE-ENIX-GAMES.COM

There's something about the original '90s Nomura character designs that still hits, and this line of posable figures brings that classic 2D art to 3D life. We're highlighting Aerith because pairing pink with red like that is a top fashion choice.

Turning the page



THE ART OF STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

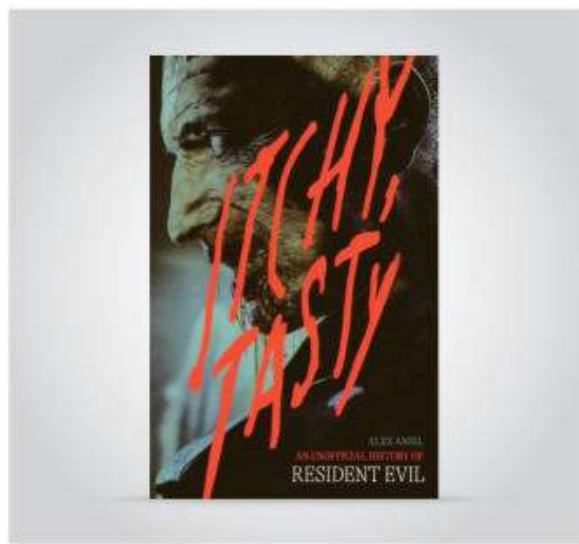
DARK HORSE COMICS £37.68 AMAZON.CO.UK

Bridging the distance between the Milky Way and a galaxy far, far away, you may not be surprised to read that this pre-order could just miss your ideal gift-giving window. After all, a gently used hyperdrive is hard to come by these days. Still, you could always order ready for next year – a prequel, if you will.

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS – THE ART OF THE GAME

TITAN BOOKS LTD £29.99 WATERSTONES.COM

Return to the Abbey with a hefty book worth poring over. All of your favourites get a spot in the yearbook, with detailed breakdowns of not just their heroic attire but the more villainous 'fits seen throughout. All rather more appealing than an ugly polyester jumper.



ITCHY, TASTY: AN UNOFFICIAL HISTORY OF RESIDENT EVIL

UNBOUND £14.99 WATERSTONES.COM

Shifting gears away from coffee-table-dominating art books, this is one meaty paperback. Author Alex Aniel spent two years interviewing major players from Resi's long history, and this volume sets the scene before diving into development of the series between 1996 and 2006.

(YET MORE) STUFF WE LOVE

It's vinyl-ly here

RATCHET & CLANK: RIFT APART TWO-LP SET

MILAN RECORDS £25.50 GEAR.EU.PLAYSTATION.COM

This two-LP vinyl collects together 20 musical arrangements composed by Mark Mothersbaugh and Wataru Hokoyama, in a slipcase with gorgeous original art crafted by illustrator Shan Jiang. A gatefold slipcase opens to reveal two dimensionally different sides of the same dynamic duo.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI III NOCTURNE VINYL SOUNDTRACK BOX SET

ATLUS €59 FANGAMER.EU

This collection of bangers is one for the demon horde. Presenting 70 tracks composed by series rockstars Shoji Meguro, Kenichi Tsuchiya, Toshiko Tasaki, and Tsukasa Masuko, popping any one of these LPs on is bound to get the ritual circle going.

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2: ORIGINAL VIDEOGAME SOUNDTRACK TWO-LP SET

MONDO $40 MONDOSHOP.COM

Featuring striking artwork of the game's two protagonists by comics artist Kris Anka, the red-and-blue theme carries over to Mondo's own exclusive vinyl colourway. Pencil this pre-order in as a new year's treat for yourself.

THE LAST OF US: SEASON 1 (ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK) VINYL

SONY MASTERWORKS €45 BLACKSCREENRECORDS.COM

If you're planning to go with a mushroom option for your holiday feast, don't pop on one of these LPs as you venture into the kitchen. Otherwise, these musical arrangements from the TV adaptation (by Gustavo Santaolalla, David Fleming, Pearl Jam, and Depeche Mode) are hard not to recommend.

SECRETMODE The Chinese Room

LITTLE ORPHEUS

JOIN OUR BOLD YET HAPLESS HERO AS HE EXPLORES LOST CIVILIZATIONS, UNDERSEA KINGDOMS, PREHISTORIC JUNGLES AND LANDS BEYOND IMAGINATION.

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

ETERNAL THREADS

A SINGLE-PLAYER, FIRST-PERSON STORY-DRIVEN PUZZLE GAME OF TIME MANIPULATION, CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE.

OUT NOW COMING SOON TO CONSOLES

SECRETMODE The Chinese Room

DEAR ESTHER

A STUNNINGLY REALISED WORLD, A REMOTE AND DESOLATE ISLAND SOMEWHERE IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES.

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

ZOOL REDIMENSIONED

EXPLORE VIBRANT RETRO LANDSCAPES AND TAKE DOWN MENACING BOSSES IN A MODERN RE:IMAGINING OF THE CLASSIC PLATFORMING ADVENTURE ZOOL.

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

HER MAJESTY'S SPIFFING

JOIN CAPTAIN FRANK LEE ENGLISH AND HIS TRUSTED COLLEAGUE, ALED, AS THEY TRAVEL THROUGH THE COSMOS IN SEARCH OF PLANETS TO CLAIM FOR A NEW GALACTIC BRITISH EMPIRE!

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

MARS HORIZON 2 THE SEARCH FOR LIFE

LEAD YOUR SPACE AGENCY IN THE SEARCH FOR LIFE IN THIS AUTHENTIC STRATEGY SIMULATION GAME. INVESTIGATE THE SOLAR SYSTEM AND COLLECT EVIDENCE OF LIFE.

COMING SOON

SECRETMODE

WOBBLEDOGS

A 3D PET SIMULATION WHERE YOU RAISE YOUR OWN PERSONAL HIVE OF MUTATING DOGS, PHYSICALLY SIMULATED ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THEIR GUTS!

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

TURBO GOLF RACING

AN ACTION-PACKED FUSION OF RACING AND GOLF. TRAVERSE ACROSS A DIVERSE RANGE OF COURSES, USING YOUR CAR TO SKILLFULLY PUTT YOUR BALL IN THE HOLE.

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

SNAKE PASS

SLITHER, COIL AND CLIMB YOUR WAY TO THE TOP OF HAVEN TOR IN THIS ONE OF A KIND PHYSICS BASED, PUZZLE PLATFORM ADVENTURE.

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

A LITTLE TO THE LEFT

A COZY PUZZLE GAME THAT HAS YOU SORT, STACK, AND ORGANIZE HOUSEHOLD ITEMS

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE

STAMPEDE: RACING ROYALE

AVOID ELIMINATION AND FIGHT YOUR WAY TO THE FRONT OF THE HERD IN THE SCRAMBLE TO BE CROWNED CHAMPION!

COMING SOON

SECRETMODE

LODDLENAUT

PICK UP TRASH, EXPLORE THE VIBRANT WATERS, AND TAKE CARE OF AXOLOTL-LIKE ALIEN CREATURES!

OUT NOW

SECRETMODE The Chinese Room

STILL WAKES THE DEEP

NAVIGATE A COLLAPSING OIL RIG TO SAVE YOUR CREW FROM AN OTHERWORLDLY HORROR ON THE EDGE OF ALL LOGIC AND REALITY.

COMING SOON

SECRETMODE

PARCEL CORPS

RIDE ALONG WALLS, GRIND RAILS, AND STARTLE PIGEONS ON YOUR WAY TO CORPORATION-TOPPLING DOMINATION.

COMING SOON

SECRETMODE

MAKE WAY

SPEED AROUND LOOPS, DRIFT AROUND HELTER SKELTERS, AND UNLEASH WACKY WEAPONRY IN THIS MODERN TAKE ON CLASSIC TOP-DOWN MULTIPLAYER RACING GAMES.

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SECRET MODE

> Jak developed into a more grounded, fallible person.

OPINION

"JAK II PROVES NAUGHTY DOG DOESN'T NEED REALISM TO MAKE GREAT CHARACTERS."

Jak is every bit as real as later Naughty Dog protagonists

WRITER BIO
Francis Kenna's fascination with Naughty Dog's growth always leads him to reflect on the studio's now-dormant duo.

Despite being critically well received upon its release in 2003, Jak II's become one of Naughty Dog's more divisive releases over time. After all, it can be easy to dismiss it as being a typical example of a soulless sell-out second release, given the first game was a family-friendly collectathon platformer whereas the sequel is a more violent sandbox action game inspired by GTA III, but it was made with a pointed intent beyond a misguided financial incentive.

This was where Naughty Dog really began to flex its storytelling muscles, weaving its penchant for cutting-edge presentation into a compelling narrative. It was the title that would begin to redefine the developer, the stepping stone to it becoming the industry-leading powerhouse we know it as today, even if the staff didn't know it at the time.

While the original Jak And Daxter established an aesthetically interesting but rather vague world with its own history and characters, the GTA-inspired city sandbox developed these ideas into more than a mere backdrop. The decision to fling the protagonists into the far future might initially feel like a contrived way to force the game into a setting that can support stealing hovercars to ride between missions, but the commitment to fleshing out the characters and larger universe suggests otherwise. Shifting to Haven City gave the team the freedom they needed to experiment with deeper characterisation and a grittier tone without contradicting what the previous game had established. It was an ambitious undertaking, but even without the likes of later Naughty Dog stars (such as Amy Hennig or Neil Druckmann) penning the project, they largely stuck the landing.

Sorry Nathan Drake, but this is what an effortlessly cool action badass really looks like.

CHARACTER IS KEY

Jak is a triumphant centrepiece. Previously a cutesy, mute mascot, this iteration of the character becomes more cynical and violent due to some early-game events, yet he retains his virtuous traits. He's the same kind, courageous person that he was in the original game, but can at times come across as disagreeable, vengeful, and perhaps slightly arrogant depending on who he's interacting with. He developed into a more grounded, fallible person, and one who feels just as human as any of Naughty Dog's more recent characters, even if he doesn't look it. The supporting cast is also largely stellar (and not just Jak's pal Daxter), with many of the more prominent figures feeling just as authentic as Jak himself and, perhaps more importantly, as memorable.

The character work has been a key component in the success of both Naughty Dog's subsequent series – Uncharted and The Last Of Us. There's no doubt that Uncharted would lose a lot of its charm without the bantering between Nathan Drake and his various companions, and The Last Of Us' many heart-wrenching scenes wouldn't hit nearly as hard if players weren't so endeared to Ellie and Joel. Jak II has similar qualities, to the point where the parallels become obvious on replay. But it also means that, while I appreciate Naughty Dog's commitment to emulating realism in its newer titles, I question if that's necessary to craft enchanting characters and stories. Is it time to return to the fantastic?

OPINION

"REDUCED OFFERINGS AND A PRICE HIKE MAKE PS PLUS ESSENTIAL A HARD SELL."

Ironically feeling less essential than ever, PS Plus is losing its appeal

WRITER BIO
Henry Stockdale had been subscribed to PlayStation Plus for a decade, though changes mean he's now doubting its value.

After nearly a decade, last month I cancelled my PlayStation Plus subscription. Ever since getting my launch-day PS4 I'd been paying for the monthly games – not all of them have been winners but Plus introduced me to big names like Yakuza Kiwami and Rocket League. After the recent price hikes, however, I'm no longer getting the same value.

Plus was once solid competition for Xbox's Games With Gold, though Game Pass' emergence meant the landscape changed. Last year's Plus revamp was long overdue for those who wanted more, providing further options across three tiers. I went all-in with Premium, gaining benefits like the games catalogue, cloud streaming, and retro games. Now I wish I'd saved the money.

I don't doubt there's value in the games catalogue for those on tighter budgets, though the exact value of the selection will always vary according to people's personal preferences. Personally, most of the included games that interested me were ones I'd already played. Hundreds of extra games is nice, but wasted on someone without the time to play more than a handful. Retro games were my biggest personal draw, and though recent releases are lacking, you can at least buy them individually and cheaply.

I swapped back to the Essential tier once my annual sub lapsed and I didn't miss those bonuses. All I wanted was the odd game and access to online multiplayer. 2023's monthly games haven't been exciting for me, though Sackboy: A Big Adventure and Alan Wake Remastered were highlights. I was fine with this setup until the price hike.

PAY MORE FOR LESS

Seeing Essential rise to £59.99 annually, with no service improvements and fewer monthly games than several years ago, stings; I still recall Plus including PS3 and Vita games. A £10 annual increase doesn't sound like much but years of living paycheque to paycheque turned me into a deal hunter, rarely spending over £35 annually with online retailers. The ongoing cost of living crisis and rising home energy usage over winter makes it harder to justify, too.

Watching this climb even higher for the Extra (from £83.99 to £99.99) and Premium (from £99.99 to £111.99) tiers, I believe Sony risks more than it gains. Many players will subscribe purely for the online multiplayer requirement with premium games, though free-to-play games don't need it. When popular games like Fortnite, Warzone 2.0, Rocket League, and Apex Legends are exempt, that's a much harder sell.

I'd be more inclined to resubscribe if the monthly Essential games provided better choice, though I don't see that changing due to Extra's catalogue. The same goes if there was parity with Xbox Game Pass, though Jim Ryan calling Microsoft's service "value destructive" suggests that won't happen soon. His successor may think differently.

Defining value is tough as it's subjective. Many subscribers will be content with the current Plus offerings, yet I would argue that Sony is leaving Plus Essential subscribers behind. It's a feeling not helped by new benefits being exclusive to higher tiers, like early access to select Sony Pictures films. Essential feels lacking for the price. I'm taking my money elsewhere.

Rocket League is free-to-play now, but in 2015 its launch on Plus boosted the service significantly.

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PS5 EXCLUSIVE
FINAL FANTASY VII
REBIRTH
HANDS-ON! How huge maps and dynamic team combat are reforging the legendary PS1 classic

#34 We unpicked what we knew about the next installment of FFVII.

ART STAR

I recently bought a PS5. I was getting rather excited with the prospect of GTA 6 coming out soon hopefully. Has to be close. I think Rockstar are one of the best developers of all time. They are top-tier in what they do and I have massive appreciation for them doing what they are doing and have done. With the fact GTA 6 is going to have a large playable map in rumours from leaks makes me awfully excited and I can't imagine what the graphical fidelity will be like with this being made for PS5.

I have appreciated smaller indie games as a result of your recommendations.
Sam Power

Glad to hear you're enjoying the indies. You might need them – while we're hoping to see GTA 6 in 2024 or 2025, there's no confirmed release date.

FOOTBALL CRAZY

I read with interest your review of EA FC24, however as most of the review focussed on Ultimate Team, I find myself wondering if it isn't time for Ultimate Team to become a game on its own. This would allow those of us who desire a football game to get one specifically made for that while turning Ultimate Team into a free to play would allow those who want the glorified trading card game to continue playing without spending £60 a year to do so.
David Robinson

Ignoring FUT, EA Sports FC 24 is the best footie game for some years. That said, there's room for a bit of friendly competition.

'SHOCKING

As a PS3 frequenter, I need you to pick up the red telephone to Sony, to put in a request for some new, fairly priced DualShock 3s!
James Binnington

Aaah! If only we had that power; Oscar would have a new PS Vita right now.

"I FIND MYSELF WONDERING IF IT ISN'T TIME FOR ULTIMATE TEAM TO BECOME A GAME ON ITS OWN."

STAR LETTER
CHASING 'STICKS

Ok so we have a new puppy and basically she ate my PS5 controller! Well actually all she did was badly chew one of the joysticks. Now the controller did still technically work but was beyond usable because one joystick was half gone. So I phoned PlayStation only to be told they don't do joysticks as replacement parts nor would they themselves be able to do a repair. I ended up having to buy a whole new controller – the pup is lucky she is so darn cute! But it does seem such a waste of resources that an essentially working controller has to be trashed for one element that on the face of it would seem replaceable.

That doesn't change the fact I am obsessed with my Ps5, it just means I make sure all parts of it are out of reach of needle teeth!
Amanda Evans

First up, it sounds like the puppy is okay, which is the important thing. As more complex tech goes into controllers, such as haptic feedback, rumble, and so on, they become increasingly tricky things for people to fix at home. But that does mean when one goes wrong, it means an expensive replacement – and waste.

CAN I GET A RT?

The most pleasing tweetings from our timeline...

@LIsNobody
I'm sorry @PLAYgamingmag but Balan Wonderworld is better than sonic superstars? Hoe is that even possible! Balan is one of the worst games of all time

@KrushendoKO
Yatta!! I knew Balan would shine through!

@AntoniaBonello
That has to be the best opener for a review I have ever read

[*Jess was *ahem* thorough when it came to Baldur's Gate 3's romances* – ed]

TROLL OF THE MONTH

@ALahftel
I shall write reviews with that energy from here on out.

@dashiellwood
Knack 3
[*Haven't you annoyed enough people this month?* – ed]

@F4nta5yy
There's no hole in the calendar. Am I having a brainfart? How'm I gonna hang it on my wall?

[*Errr... that might be* our *brainfart* – ed]

@SmolOSpooks
I saw this in stores the other day and this issue is BEAUTIFUL! Good job all round

"I GET THAT THEY WON'T DO AN EXPANSION BUT IT WOULD BE GREAT IF THEY PERIODICALLY ADDED MORE SIDE JOBS."
MARK TULLY'S NOT DONE WITH CYBERPUNK 2077

"THE NEW ENDING THEY ADDED IN FOR PHANTOM LIBERTY WAS DARK LOL..."
CAMERON P COX MIGHT BE

READERS' MOST WANTED

Which games are bleeping loudest on your radar?

01
Marvel's Wolverine
Honestly, you want the adamantium-boned man more than Deadpool does.
FORMAT PS5

02
Final Fantasy VII Rebirth
We're ready to see the next bit of the story now!
FORMAT PS5
ETA 2024

03
Resident Evil 9
Rumours of a sub-title, Apocalypse, raised interest. Let's hope it's better than the film of the same name...
FORMAT PS5
ETA TBC

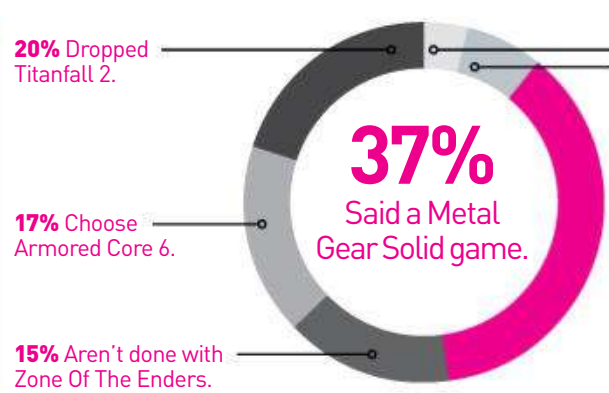
04
Tomb Raider I-III Remastered Starring Lara Croft
Never mind that awful title, the queen is returning!
FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA 14 FEB

05
Alone In The Dark
A little star power goes a long way. And this game promises a *lot* of star power.
FORMAT PS5
ETA 16 JAN

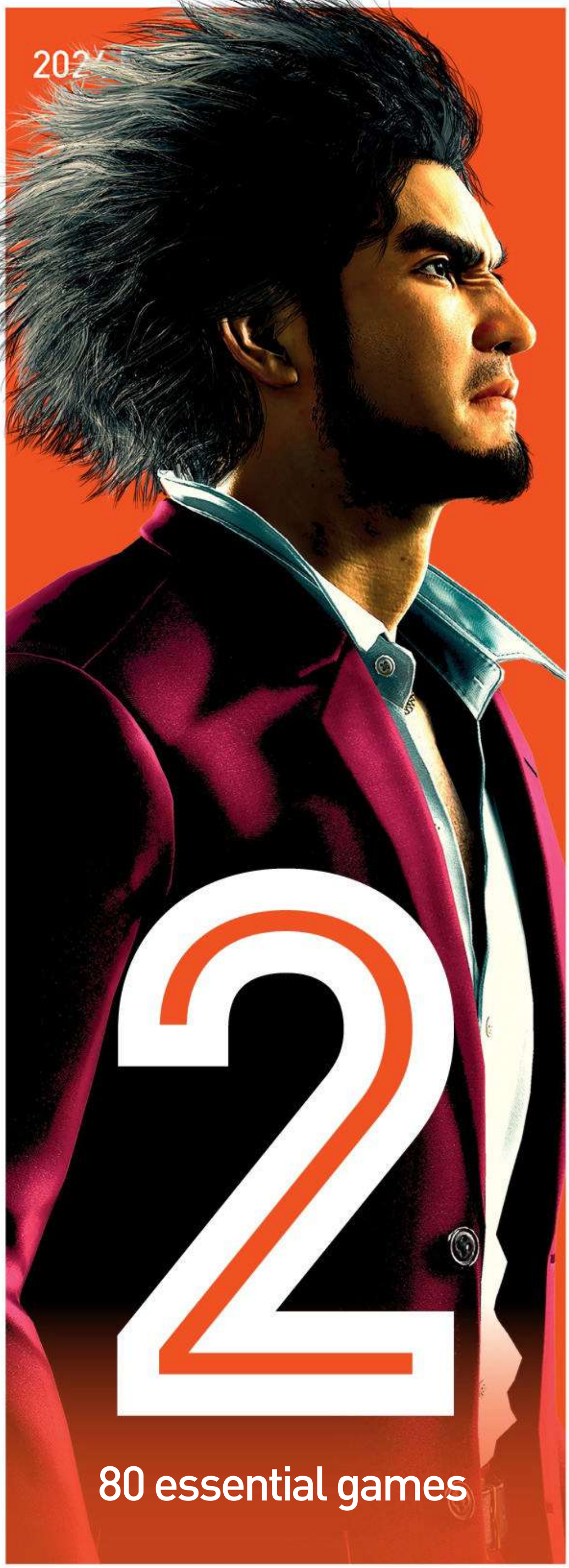
VOTE NOW!
Tell us the five games you can't wait to play at play@futurenet.com

EXIT POLL
Our Facebook fans answer a final question

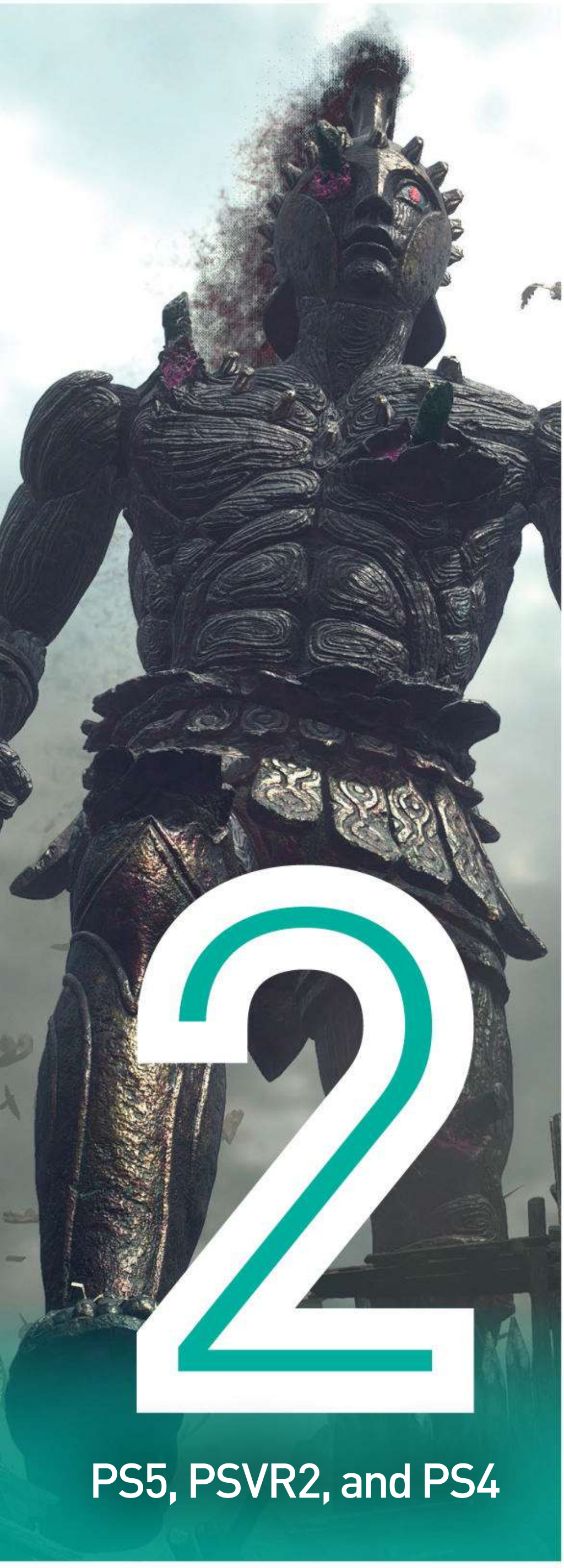
WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE GAME WITH MECHS IN?


37%
Said a Metal Gear Solid game.
20% Dropped Titanfall 2.
17% Choose Armored Core 6.
15% Aren't done with Zone Of The Enders.
4% Choose the stylish Iron Harvest
7% Prefer a Gundam title.

NEXT MONTH
Who's your favourite comic-book villain on PlayStation?


202
2
80 essential games

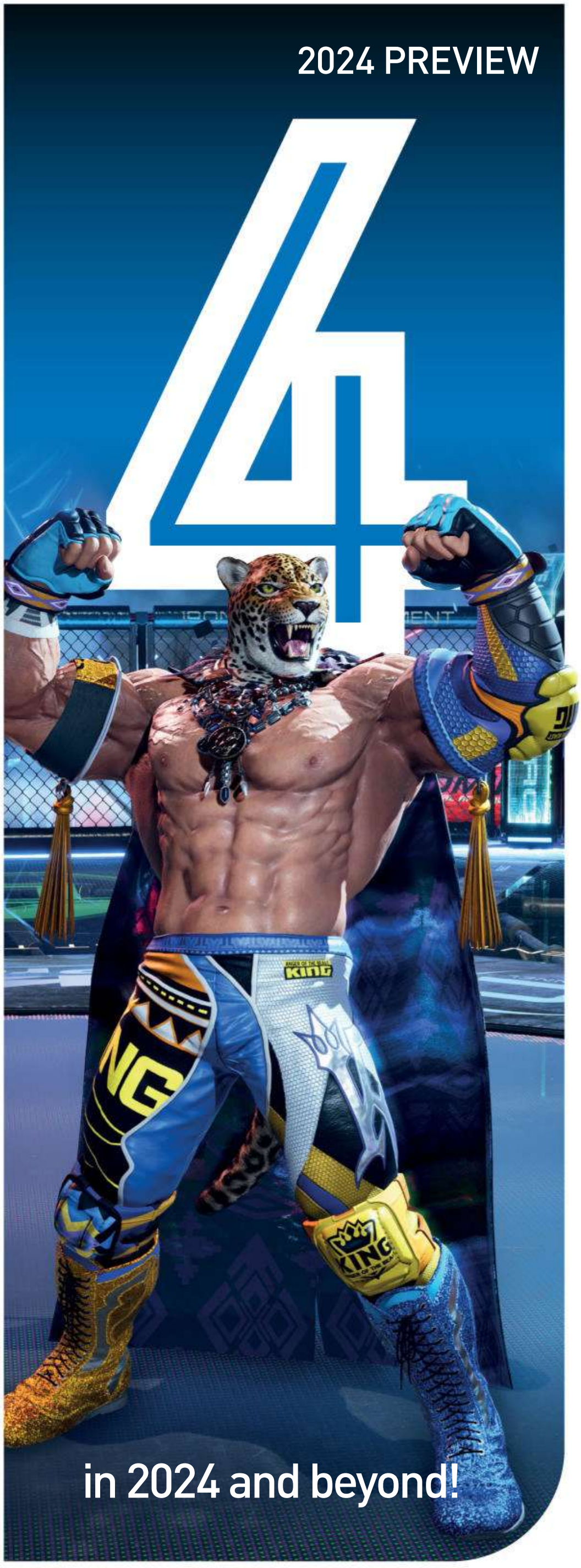
0
you need to play on



2024 PREVIEW

2

PS5, PSVR2, and PS4



in 2024 and beyond!

The most disturbing creature we've met so far. That weird bin with eyes isn't exactly doing it for us either...

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** SFB GAMES **DEV** SFB GAMES **PLAYERS** 1

CROW COUNTRY

You'd have to be bird-brained to miss this one

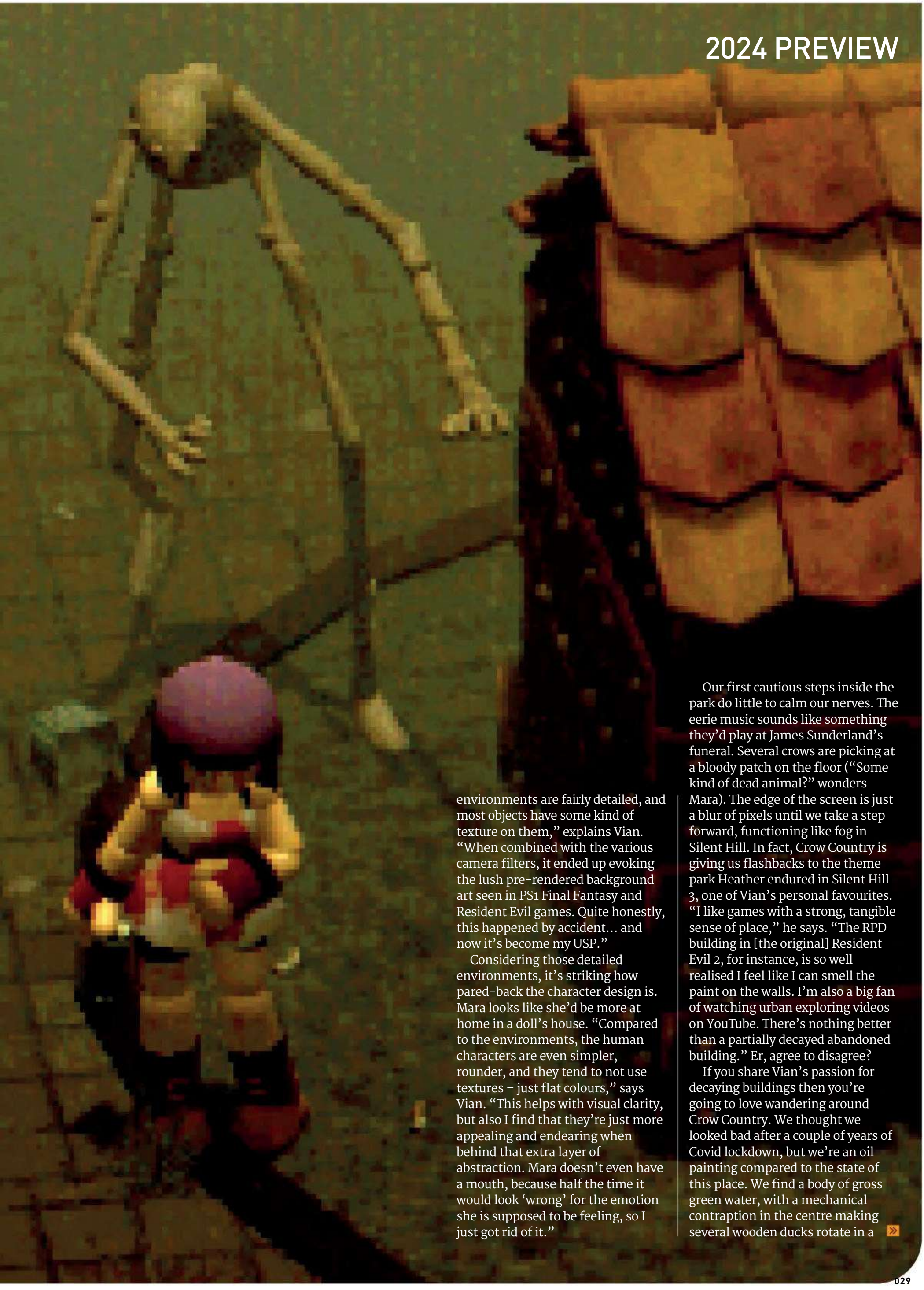
What the hell happened here? We were thrilled to learn the new game from the developer of the excellent Tangle Tower was set in a theme park. True, Tangle Tower is about solving a murder, but it has a great sense of humour and colourful characters full of life. Crow Country is full of the opposite; it's a run-down abandoned theme park where the theme seems to be 'nauseating dread'. What inspired such a horrific new direction?

"It's not as much of a departure as you might think," claims Adam Vian, creative director at SFB Games. "Crow Country is a narrative-focussed atmospheric game about exploring a single location, solving puzzles, and unlocking secret rooms. So is Tangle Tower." For its new game, SFB is adding frights to that mix because survival horror is Vian's favourite genre. "It's just such a perfect, satisfying balance of ingredients. You have to engage your brain, you have to think ahead, you have to make decisions, you can make mistakes. It's all about getting just the right amount of player agency within defined parameters."

CAW BLIMEY

You play as special agent Mara Forest, who is searching for Edward Crow, the owner of Crow Country, who's been missing since he closed his park two years ago. The game's set in 1990, appropriate given how it looks. Glance at the screenshots and you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd accidentally skipped ahead to PLAY's RetroStation section. Crow Country is a love letter to PS1-era horror, when pre-rendered backdrops were the norm. "The

"IT'S A THEME PARK WHERE THE THEME SEEMS TO BE 'NAUSEATING DREAD.'"



environments are fairly detailed, and most objects have some kind of texture on them," explains Vian. "When combined with the various camera filters, it ended up evoking the lush pre-rendered background art seen in PS1 Final Fantasy and Resident Evil games. Quite honestly, this happened by accident… and now it's become my USP."

Considering those detailed environments, it's striking how pared-back the character design is. Mara looks like she'd be more at home in a doll's house. "Compared to the environments, the human characters are even simpler, rounder, and they tend to not use textures – just flat colours," says Vian. "This helps with visual clarity, but also I find that they're just more appealing and endearing when behind that extra layer of abstraction. Mara doesn't even have a mouth, because half the time it would look 'wrong' for the emotion she is supposed to be feeling, so I just got rid of it."

Our first cautious steps inside the park do little to calm our nerves. The eerie music sounds like something they'd play at James Sunderland's funeral. Several crows are picking at a bloody patch on the floor ("Some kind of dead animal?" wonders Mara). The edge of the screen is just a blur of pixels until we take a step forward, functioning like fog in Silent Hill. In fact, Crow Country is giving us flashbacks to the theme park Heather endured in Silent Hill 3, one of Vian's personal favourites. "I like games with a strong, tangible sense of place," he says. "The RPD building in [the original] Resident Evil 2, for instance, is so well realised I feel like I can smell the paint on the walls. I'm also a big fan of watching urban exploring videos on YouTube. There's nothing better than a partially decayed abandoned building." Er, agree to disagree?

If you share Vian's passion for decaying buildings then you're going to love wandering around Crow Country. We thought we looked bad after a couple of years of Covid lockdown, but we're an oil painting compared to the state of this place. We find a body of gross green water, with a mechanical contraption in the centre making several wooden ducks rotate in a

1

2

3

4

1 Mara doesn't have any money, but the game lets you kick every vending machine you find for items. A lovely touch. 2 Do we really want to find out what turned the water that colour? Can we literally learn *anything* else instead? 3 You might think crows are an odd, creepy choice of animal to base your theme park around. And you'd be right. 4 Mara had better not have just found a copy of PLAY. Our lovely readers don't enjoy our magazine on the toilet...

» circle. A nice idea for an attraction, except the ducks have a horrible, jerky motion. At least Mara moves more smoothly – or not, depending on what era of gaming you prefer. "You can use the D-pad for tank controls, or the analogue stick for modern controls," says Vian. "I was a stubborn old-school supporter of the tank controls in Crow Country until the day I – grudgingly – added modern controls. I quickly realised it was better, and never looked back. I've really let myself down there." Don't be hard on yourself Adam! We think it's an ingenious compromise, likewise with the ability to move the camera somewhat freely. Was locking it in place ever considered?

"Doing fixed camera angles *well* is actually incredibly difficult," explains Vian. "You're basically committing to showing each area of your game as maybe two or three considered compositions, like paintings. Each one has to be both functionally useful and an artful composition. That's hard! It's much easier to just always keep the camera at the same height, and at the same angle. Even though the Crow Country camera 'moves' to follow the character, in many ways it's more rigid and uniform than the fixed cameras in Resident Evil. For example, I never have to show the sky. Or the ceiling." Well, we're sure the full game will never be so mean as to take nasty advantage of that...

FATAL ATTRACTIONS

It's not long before Crow Country stops simply laying on the atmosphere and goes in for the kill. Soon we're being attacked by pulsating piles of goop, which slither towards us, and shuddering zombie-like creatures that come in a worrying variety of increasingly large sizes. A vent bursts open and spiders pour out, like the zombie dogs leaping through the windows in the original Resident Evil. Worst of all is a traumatising grey monster with long, stilt-like limbs. We lose all our precious handgun ammo to it pretty much immediately.

But it's the horrors the game *doesn't* show you that stick in the mind. We enter a digging site with a large hole in the ground and a dreadful moaning coming from it.

A chain leads into that hole, shaking as if someone (something?) is stuck on the other end. A notebook nearby describes how a digging company refused to keep working. 'They wanted to know the full size and shape of the thing they were excavating. They wanted to know what it was made of. They wanted to know how long it had been there'. Um, ignorance is bliss? Crow Country is full of writing like this. Often darkly comic, discoverable notes do an excellent job of setting up mysteries and promising fresh horrors to come. Get your ticket booked for a proper visit next year.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 28 FEB **PUB** SQUARE ENIX **DEV** SQUARE ENIX **PLAYERS** 1

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

Back for seven seconds

The RPG returns, but not as you remember it. Many of the familiar beats remain – Junon, Cosmo Canyon, uh, you-know-what towards the end of disc one – reimagined with modern-day graphics ready to break your heart all over again. Or will they?

Cloud and co fought against fate at the end of Remake, appearing to win the opportunity to write the ending anew. As a result, Rebirth is set to continue remixing fresh surprises into its retelling – and we're not just talking about another rousing dance number alongside Andrea Rhodea.

Besides minigames, there are many more miles to explore. Many of FFVII's iconic locations have been expanded in Rebirth. For just one example, we went hands-on with the open wilds of Junon last issue, a massive area that can be explored on the series' favoured feathered friends, chocobos. It's far from the only thing promising to make this revived oldie a goldie.

"CLOUD AND CO FOUGHT AGAINST FATE AT THE END OF REMAKE, APPEARING TO WIN THE CHANCE TO REWRITE THE ENDING."

RISE OF THE RONIN

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** SONY **DEV** TEAM NINJA **PLAYERS** 1

The developer of soulslike heavyweights Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty and Nioh is turning its attention to the open world RPG. Set in 1863, the dying days of Japan's Edo period, in Rise Of The Ronin the centuries-long oppression of the Tokugawa Shogunate is at an end, leaving a power vacuum that forces from the West hope to fill. Through this era of plague and political turmoil, a lone swordsman carves his path – literally. But in addition to sharp wits and blades, you can engage your enemies with period-accurate firearms. As a masterless warrior, your choices are your own, but will your story spell revelation or ruin for the land?

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2 FEB **PUB** WARNER BROS GAMES **DEV** ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS **PLAYERS** 1-4

Brainiac is putting ideas in the heads of Metropolis' very best, resulting a very hostile takeover. In response, Amanda Waller is sending in her absolute worst: Harley Quinn, Deadshot, Captain Boomerang, and King Shark.

The latest entry in the Batman: Arkham universe, this title was last seen fighting for its life after the announcement of its live service features. A negative reaction greeted details of its cosmetics-only battle pass and compulsory online connection. A fresh delay followed. It has been MIA ever since; will we see it in the new year?

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** 11 BIT STUDIOS **DEV** FOOL'S THEORY **PLAYERS** 1

THE THAUMATURGE

Sick of games being happy and fun? We have great news!

'Thaumaturge', in case you were wondering, is a rare word for a magician or worker of miracles. However, developer Fool's Theory couldn't have called its game 'The Magician' as that might conjure up images of a happy adventure about pulling rabbits out of hats. Instead, The Thaumaturge is so bleak it makes The Last Of Us look like Peppa Pig.

It's an isometric RPG set in Warsaw in 1905. We're sure that in 2023 Warsaw is the loveliest place on Earth, but the alternate-history version we slump through here is about as jolly as a kitten's funeral (that's barely hyperbole; one plot point involves a strangled goose). The star of all this misery is Wiktor, who's in urgent need of a healer. Unfortunately, he ends up in a fight instead. The turn-based brawl in our hands-on lets us choose between quick jabs and more powerful, but slower, strikes. It's standard stuff, but Wiktor can also use his thaumaturge abilities to see how long he has before the opponent is going to hit him, allowing you to judge whether you've got time to opt for a stronger strike or should focus on getting those quick jabs in first. It's novel to see traditional fantasy RPG tropes applied to a more grounded punch-up, but we hope our magical powers develop more interesting twists in the full game.

UNDER A SPELL

Shortly after the fight, we bump into Rasputin. Yes, *that* Rasputin. The cad refuses to heal us until we pass a test to prove our thaumaturge ability (thank goodness the test isn't 'spell thaumaturge correctly first time'). We have to use Wiktor's heightened perception to search for Rasputin's belongings. You can then use your mental powers to draw conclusions from these belongings, learning more about the person's emotions, actions, thoughts, and words that have apparently attached themselves to the object (for example, if we were to mentally scan your copy of PLAY magazine, we'd detect your emotion of 'joy' and your strong desire to subscribe). You'll need to upgrade your mind powers in Heart, Deed, Word, and Mind Dimensions respectively in order to reach the corresponding mental conclusions. Well our 'confused' stat won't need upgrading, but we're definitely intrigued.

Even with our poor underlevelled brain, we manage to impress Rasputin enough for him to attempt to heal Wiktor. Thus begins a dream/hallucination sequence in which Wiktor's horrid dad shouts mean things at him and then a skeleton shows up. Wiktor wakes up to find Rasputin gone, but his new skeleton chum is apparently here to stay – not that Wiktor seems alarmed or even surprised by their presence. It's around this point that we start wondering if *we* are hallucinating.

Bizarre, then, but those interesting mental abilities give it huge potential. A thaumaturge scanning this preview would see that we think this one could be something special.

"THE ALTERNATE-HISTORY VERSION OF WARSAW WE SLUMP THROUGH HERE IS AS JOLLY AS A KITTEN'S FUNERAL."

The turn-based walloping plays like Final Fantasy VII if it were directed by Neil Druckmann. Actually, we'd play that.

THREE MORE IN THE WORKS

GRANBLUE FANTASY: RELINK

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 1 FEB **PUB** CYGAMES **DEV** CYGAMES **PLAYERS** 1-4

Gather your party and take to the skies, crossing blades, hurling magic, or firing a hail of bullets along the way. Real-time combat has you throwing everything you've got at a whole host of cloud-busting Big Bads, either solo alongside AI party people, or with up to three other actual human pals. Link Attacks and Chain Bursts see you lining up each of your most face-melting special moves for massive damage – though don't forget everyone needs a healer from time to time.

DEATH STRANDING 2

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT **DEV** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS **PLAYERS** 1

Babies, beaches, and big bad mechs – it's all here. Beyond heaps more surreal visuals you'll want to tease apart with a fine-toothed comb, there's a new cult on the scene that worships a figure bearing a strong resemblance to Princess Beach herself, Amelie. Masked, and displaying a serious ability to shred, we'll accept hypotheticals on a postcard. The cast is welcoming a few more famous faces besides the returning Norman Reedus, with Elle Fanning and Shioli Kutsuna taking to the sequel's stage in as-yet-unrevealed roles (though that won't stop anyone, us included, from theorising).

LITTLE NIGHTMARES III

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** BANDAI NAMCO **DEV** SUPERMASSIVE GAMES **PLAYERS** 1-2

This series of charmingly tiny tales of terror returns, this time helmed by a new developer (albeit one known for its horror titles): Guildford-based Supermassive Games. Exploring a strange, spiraling space fuelled by childhood fears, you're never alone; either in online co-op with a friend, or accompanied by an AI pal, this frightfest is designed for two. New protagonists Low and Alone both have their preferred tools, though neither can be classed as a fighter. Run, hide, or puzzle your way through the fear together.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** SQUARE ENIX **DEV** SQUARE ENIX **PLAYERS** 1

SAGA EMERALD BEYOND

Going beyonds worlds and the timeline

Perhaps it's peculiar that the SaGa franchise has been dormant in recent years, especially considering its freeform, non-linear gameplay, something more common to Western RPGs than Japanese ones. But after taking the time to remaster the old library so newcomers can familiarise themselves with the series, Square Enix is finally bringing a brand-new entry to PlayStation.

The series' trademark sense of freeform choice is ever-present in Emerald Beyond, where you're given not one but 17 different worlds to explore, each with its own unique aesthetics, cultures, and races. They're all reachable via a hub known as the Beyond, connected by mysterious Emerald Waves that can only be seen by your protagonists – Tsunanori, who can control kugutsu (essentially animated puppets), witch-in-training Ameya (who takes the form of an 11-year-old schoolgirl), immortal vampire and dethroned king Siugnas, Diva No. 5 (a mech with the literal soul of a singer), and Bonnie and Formina (two new police recruits who fight as one).

TEAM BP

So who will you play as and which world will you visit first? Well, in typical SaGa fashion, that's all up to you as your choices and actions, and which Emerald Waves you follow in the world, will shape the story and what quests you'll tackle, making no two players' experiences the same.

Whatever path you take, however, you're going to have to fight, which brings us to Emerald Beyond's strategic turn-based battles. Each party member has a preset formation that influences their battle abilities, and while a traditional turn order timeline is displayed, it's possible to manipulate the order to gain strategic advantages, such as having two or more party members align at the same time to unleash a team attack combo. Another element carried over from previous titles is that you don't gain XP but you can use Glimmers to learn new skills at random for each character.

Be warned that using abilities and skills costs BP, which is shared between the party, so you'll have to think wisely how you manage this resource. Do you spread it out evenly or go for broke and unleash a powerful attack that leaves the others unable to act that turn? Such choices and many more await.

Enemies can team up to attack, unless you break them up on the timeline first.

The little carters are pretty cute, but the racing action is deadly serious.

FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA 2024 **PUB** SECRET MODE
DEV SUMO LEAMINGTON **PLAYERS** 60

STAMPEDE: RACING ROYALE

A bumper-to-bumper crop

While we might not need another twist on a battle royale in our lives, it's hard to say no to getting behind the wheel of another Sumo Digital racer. (The studio was behind the impeccable Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed, among others.) Especially when the price of entry is absolutely nothing at all.

Servers are live when we play, meaning we have 59 other real live racers to beat in the pack, whittled down over three rounds. Pushing the pedal to the metal, our kart feels great to control (we go for a Balanced one, though there are three weights to choose from – unlocks are all cosmetic-only). Karts are responsive to little nudges, drifts are rewarded with a boost that charges up, and weapon power-ups can be deployed both forwards and backwards. Playing with others online it's chaotic with so many racers on the track, but avoids feeling unmanageable.

FINAL HEAT

As the laps tick down we avoid the axe suffered by those at the back of the pack. Our next event is a Battle, letting us loose on a smaller, cyclical track where all roads lead to more power-ups and unsuspecting racers to hurl them at, the weaving nature of the routes reminiscent of Crash Team Racing's battle modes. It's a simpler proposition than mastering a track: land enough hits to stay at the top.

It's a riot, and after one match is over we can't wait to jump back in. It's a good sign in a genre where games have been struggling to land as of late, and if this live service can bring the events and updates to pair with its great mechanical core we'll have a podium winner yet.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** TINYBUILD **DEV** CASEY DONNELLAN GAMES **PLAYERS** 1-4

KILL IT WITH FIRE 2

Into the spider-worse

Multi is the name of the game in this arachnid-eradicating sequel. Your hunt has not only taken you beyond the first game's small-town setting, it's dragged you into the multiverse to make sure you get the job done across all permutations of reality. Portals will take you from spooky manors to space stations, and your exterminator's arsenal, flames naturally included, has expanded to include lasers and more. Multiplayer also joins the mix, as the campaign's playable solo or with a party of four. And if you want to go rogue, a PvP mode allows you to control a spider as you dodge death.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** KASEDO GAMES **DEV** BEARD ENVY **PLAYERS** 1

UNCLE CHOP'S ROCKET SHOP

Capitalist pigs... in... spaaaaaaace!

Ever had a landlord so persistent that even your death wouldn't protect you from rent payments? That's how things are for Wilbur, a space mechanic under the thumb of the tyrannical Uncle Chop. In this roguelike fix-'em-up, you repair ships brought to you by the galaxy's quirky characters, which involves odd minigames, and often consulting dense documentation (similar to Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes). What Uncle Chop doesn't take from you can be invested back into the chop shop, carrying across to your new life should you perish. Even death won't stop the rent piling up.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** DEVOLVER DIGITAL **DEV** ALL POSSIBLE FUTURES **PLAYERS** 1

THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

Small but mighty

Literary characters coming to life is always a treat, but it's never been done in quite the way Plucky Squire does it. In this adventure-platformer hybrid, you play as Jot, the hero of his own picture book. Within the pages, Jot has the distinct advantage of being the hero, destined to win against the evil sorcerer Humgrump. But what about in a world where the ending isn't written yet? One day, Humgrump uses his magic to kick Jot out of his book, forcing him to fight his way back to his happy ending.

CARE A JOT

Other games have catapulted their heroes to and from the real world, for example Sayonara Wild Hearts and Lost Words: Beyond The Page, so the concept behind The Plucky Squire is a familiar one. Switching from the 2D pages of the book to the 3D world – the child's bedroom in which the book lies – is especially magical. From the colourful picture-book kingdom of Mojo to the many details you can see in the real world, the Plucky Squire looks stunning. From what we've seen so far, the game will use the shift between 2D and 3D in many ways beyond the book, for example by allowing you to enter the illustration on a tin of biscuits, and we're excited to see the worlds converge.

You'll only be able to leave and re-enter the picture book at certain points, which may seem like a restraint, but will probably make it easier to tell when the solution to a puzzle lies in the world beyond. Expect to manipulate the boundaries of the book by leafing through pages in the real world, swapping words to overcome obstacles and taking items from other 2D worlds back to your own. Developer All Possible Futures says to expect The Plucky Squire to last between five and seven hours, most likely because there are only so many things you can do with the concept and the studio aims to "surprise players at every turn". A lot of great things come in tiny packages, and we expect Jot to be one of them.

"YOU'LL BE ABLE TO LEAVE AND RE-ENTER THE PICTURE BOOK."

The kingdom of Mojo is literally an open book, but someone needs to turn its pages.

HAROLD HALIBUT

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** SPRING 2024 **PUB** SLOW BROS **DEV** SLOW BROS **PLAYERS** 1

We've seen Harold Halibut several times during its years in development, and each time it looks a little bit more outlandish – in the best way. As being set on a spaceship under the sea isn't noteworthy enough, the ship is city-sized and the ocean is on an alien planet. When Harold meets one of the resident aliens, he discovers a whole new world, much like a famous red-haired mermaid. For all this whimsy, however, you can also expect quite serious conversations about being part of a community, mutual understanding, and acknowledging each other's differences.

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** Q4 2024 **PUB** PARADOX **DEV** THE CHINESE ROOM, HARDSUIT LABS **PLAYERS** 1

Development on Bloodlines 2 has been a journey, to put it mildly. First announced in 2019, internal turmoil at then-developer Hardsuit Labs plus the pandemic led to repeated delays. Now The Chinese Room, the studio behind horror games such as Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs, has taken over production. Fans can rest easy – apparently the studio will retain most of what's already done. A gameplay reveal is expected early in 2024, so we hope to be making the streets a little unsafer as vampires by next autumn.

BABY STEPS

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** SUMMER 2024 **PUB** DEVOLVER DIGITAL **DEV** GABE CUZZILLO, MAXI BOCH, BENNETT FODDY **PLAYERS** 1

If you love games that test your patience as much as your skill, look no further than Baby Steps. Developed by two of the minds behind Ape Out and Getting Over It, Baby Steps is about a man who can use his legs, and *only* his legs. Seeing this concept in action is something else – the vocalisation of 25 year-old Nate, who appears to be wearing a giant onesie, makes his flailing around ten times funnier than it already is. You thought Death Stranding was a walking simulator? Think again! Here, even an uneven stone could spell the end for our 'hero'.

BROKEN SWORD – PARZIVAL'S STONE

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** REVOLUTION SOFTWARE **DEV** REVOLUTION SOFTWARE **PLAYERS** 1

Before Uncharted there was Broken Sword, a series of point-and-click adventures in which lawyer George and journalist Colette investigated murders, unearthed mysterious artefacts, and chased cultists around the globe. Over a decade since the last entry in the series, still helmed by creator Charles Cecil, Parzival's Sword should speak to fans old and new, thanks to a mix of 2D and 3D visuals and a modern take on point-and-click gaming, plus Revolution Software has proven its knack for puzzles.

FOAMSTARS

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** SQUARE ENIX
DEV TOYLOGIC **PLAYERS** 1-4

We're not saying PlayStation-exclusive Foamstars is without its similarities to a certain other colourful non-violent shooter, but it *is* more than that. Its big selling point is – you guessed it – foam, because the suds that accumulate during each 4v4 match stack up into platforms, mountains, and obstacles. Cleverly used, it's not just a weapon but a tool. So far, we've seen two game modes: Smash The Star, where the best player becomes the target after seven players have been eliminated; and the dodgeball-like 2v2 Happy Bath Survival. It's early, but this could be frantic fun for players of most ages.

STONKS-9800

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** Q4 2024 **PUB** TERNOX
DEV TERNOX **PLAYERS** 1

Who hasn't dreamed of being a stockbroker? You haven't? well, perhaps after playing Stonks-9800 by Ukranian solo developer Ternox, you will. You're running a company trading on the Japanese stock exchange in the '80s – what could go wrong? You need to manage stocks, pay off the yakuza, and invest your hard-earned money in properties, at the bar, or in betting on horse races. If you were unbeatable at Like A Dragon's business management game, Stonks-9800 could well be the game for you, as it takes itself about as seriously as Sega's adventure in the criminal underworld.

EUROPA

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** FUTURE FRIENDS GAMES
DEV HELDER PINTO **PLAYERS** 1

Who would've thought space could look this lovely? Europa imagines the moon of Saturn that gives this adventure its name as a lush paradise, with an art style reminiscent of Studio Ghibli films. As android Zee, you'll solve various puzzles in the planet's dungeons, meet new lifeforms and try to uncover the story of the last surviving human. In order to get around, Zee uses a jetpack that lets him fly almost anywhere and allows him to dash on even ground. Intrigued by its smooth movement and fascinating world, we can't wait to see more of the alien planet in 2024.

PARCEL CORPS

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** Q4 2024 **PUB** SECRET MODE
DEV BILLY GOAT ENTERTAINMENT **PLAYERS** 1

Jet Set Radio enjoyers may recently have been treated to Bomb Rush Cyberfunk, but what developer Billy Goat is doing with Parcel Corps doesn't seem too different to one of the most stylish games to ever let you take on a totalitarian regime. In this comedic action-adventure, you race other delivery riders to keep your precarious job. In order to beat the competition and stay out of reach of the police, you need to wallride, grind, and generally make the city your skatepark. It's not a matter of life or death, but you don't need to be a chosen one all the time, do you?

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** NIS AMERICA **DEV** NIHON FALCOM **PLAYERS** 1

YS X: NORDICS

A pirate (princess) life for us

Don't let the fact that this is the tenth Ys put you off – while the series does have one long, convoluted timeline, each game can usually be enjoyed for itself. It's not exactly Kingdom Hearts – you'll only miss a few cool references. And having spent a few hours with the recent Japanese release, we can assure you Ys X is a perfect entry point for anyone curious about Adol Christin's many adventures.

Set just a month after the events of Ys II (originally released in 1988!), Adol's on his way to Celceta when the ship he is sailing is boarded by pirates led by the fierce so-called Pirate Princess, Karja Balta, from the Norman Empire. After Adol survives this encounter with Karja and her crew more owing to their fascination with his Mana powers than his skill, you land in the archipelago of Obelia Bay.

"WORKING AS A TEAM IS NOT MERELY SOMETHING THIS PAIR HAVE TO ACCEPT, IT'S KEY TO SUCCESS."

What began as a simple journey north soon becomes much more complicated. The Bay is attacked by Greegers, a mysterious race of immortal monsters and beings that attack and set fire to the town in which you landed. And as if that's not enough, as a result of you using Mana in your brief fight with Karja, the two of you have become bound by the Mana-String, meaning your fates have become intertwined and you cannot be separated.

Fortunately, neither Adol nor Karja are any too pleased with the Greegers' invasion, and as mana is their weakness, the pair are happy to work together to push them back (and discover something important about the Bay in the process). Yes, we've got an 'odd couple' situation that becomes immediately compelling to follow.

TWO'S COMPANY

Recent Ys games have featured party-based real-time combat similar to that in other RPGs, but it, while entertaining, has failed to evolve with subsequent releases. In Ys X it is replaced with an overhauled Cross Action combat system linked to the in-universe mana intertwining of our protagonists that reinvigorates the action. Rather than dealing with an ensemble party, you'll be travelling and fighting as a duo throughout the game's roughly 40-hour story, with the ability to control both characters at once in battle.

Combat feels incredibly slick. While you can simply run around, dodge, block, and attack enemies solo as Adol and Karja (switching quickly between them), if you dance between enemies using L2 to grapple with the Mana-String and dash towards them, you can squeeze L2 to draw both heroes together in Combine mode. In this mode, at the cost of some manoeuvrability, the pair move as one and can inflict stronger attacks on foes and activate their special Combi mode skills. Working as a team is not merely something this pair have to accept, it's key to success.

It also motivates you to pay attention to both characters' health, as your chance of victory will be seriously hampered if one of them falls in battle. This feels like a genuine evolution from what the series has done in the past, ensuring each battle feels intense and exciting while making combos feel intuitive as you hand off attacks between the two, team up for big strikes, then split apart again.

The Mana-String doesn't only feature in combat, it's handy for exploration as well. Moving around the world is no laborious trudge from point A to point B merely for story purposes, as you use your grappling hook to swing over gaps, bring out the Mana Rider to essentially board down slopes, and use area-specific Mana Actions in some locations. Traversal is an area often overlooked in RPGs yet feels alive here, with variety in environments and the introduction of scripted sequences further helping to avoid tedious repetition.

YO HO NO

The only addition to the exploration that feels less considered is sailing. Adol's in a coastal region and has a pirate princess for a partner, so it's no surprise he has his own ship to carry him between the different islands. Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag this is not, however; ship movement feels slow, and naval combat feels cumbersome.

These ships retain a real-world lack of agility that is commendable, but the sailing sections feel enough of a departure from the rest of the game to become annoying interruptions, even before we discuss the difficulty of aiming attacks and the irritatingly slow movement of these ships that interrupts the flow of an otherwise-enthralling fantasy adventure.

Sailing aside, Ys X is an exciting evolution of the formula promising something for long-time fans and newcomers alike, making this an easy addition to the list of RPGs to watch out for in 2024.

2

1 Boat combat is an interesting addition to the battling, albeit with mixed execution. 2 The fates of Adol Christin and Karja Balta are quite literally entangled by Mana. 3 In combat, working together will ensure your attacks deal maximum damage and lead to victory. 4 While many of the Greegers are monsters, some humanoid ones also taunt and threaten you in their assault on Karnack.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** MERGE GAMES **DEV** INFUSE STUDIO **PLAYERS** 1

SPIRIT OF THE NORTH 2

Fox goes mything in action

There's a good chance that you've played the previous Spirit Of The North, as the Enhanced Edition was one of the very first games available to buy for your shiny new PS5. If you haven't, though, don't worry, the sequel looks set to stand just fine on its own, although you still have time to catch up if you want to.

You take control of a fox, but fortunately/disappointingly, there's no rooting through people's bins here. You'll instead be exploring a fantastical world with a raven companion, seeking to free some mystical beings from the corruption that binds their bodies and souls. While there's no danger of getting your snout stuck in an old crisp packet, you *will* be able to customise your fox's appearance, tweaking your furry protagonist's looks to your liking.

The world is split across lush forests, foreboding crypts, and snowy mountaintops. As well as a variety of environments to gawk at, we're promised plenty of secrets for the uncovering. As it's an open world, we'd expect nothing less; the mythology running through the story and the setting should be put to good use.

"THERE'S NO DANGER OF GETTING YOUR SNOUT STUCK IN AN OLD CRISP PACKET."

If you remember 2020's Unreal Engine 5 tech demo running on PS5, you may also remember people getting excited about Lumen, the global illumination tech that developers can use to spread complex and realistic lighting across their worlds. That's exactly what Infuse Studio is doing with Spirit Of The North 2, utilising Lumen to raise the quality of lighting and reflections high above the first game.

It's not all about the looks, of course, but we do have to go back to that open world. The trailer gives glimpses of weather effects, in the forms of snow, rain, and even some light mist. We *also* saw in the trailer, in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment, the raven carrying the fox across a huge gap in a cavern. New traversal options for our foxy friend?

Almost certainly sharing the previous game's complete lack of dialogue, conveying its story in true 'show, don't tell' style, Spirit Of The North 2 promises to deliver an atmospheric and entrancing adventure. We look forward to getting our paws on it.

Lock up your chickens, this fox is going open world.

The Viper is just one of the new jobs you'll get to grips with in Tural. We hope you've been studying the blade!

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** SUMMER 2024
PUB SQUARE ENIX **DEV** SQUARE ENIX **PLAYERS** MULTI (ONLINE)

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

Best summer vacation ever?

Here's the inside scoop: every time they showed the latest trailer for this expansion at London Fan Festival, the crowd cheered when hungry catboy G'raha Tia bit into his well-earned taco. After the cataclysmic climax of this MMORPG's initial ten-year story arc, G'raha and the other Scions Of The Seventh Dawn are taking time off from saving the world and instead getting knee-deep in a messy rite of ascension on the sunkissed shores of Tural.

On top of exploring this new location, and getting to grips with the just-announced dual-wielding Viper job, *and* racing towards the expansion's level cap of 100, the story sees you and plenty of your favourite characters taking different sides in its central conflict.

SEE 'EM IN A CROWN

Currently on the throne of Tural is Gulool Ja Ja, a two-headed Mamool Ja who's well regarded by his people. He's no pushover when it comes to trading punches either, with the Warrior Of Light going toe-to-toe with the muscular monarch in the latest trailer.

If you've spent much time in the still-running earlier MMORPG Final Fantasy XI, you'll not only recognise this Ma-major player but be well prepared for the upcoming Alliance Raid series, Echoes Of Vana'diel. Naturally XI isn't the only entry getting a little bit of love here, with new bird-beaked beast tribe the Pelupelu being direct coastal transplants from Final Fantasy X. Capping off ten years' story, this expansion not only pays homage to all that came before but will also set sail for stories anew. Watch this space.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** SPRING 2024 **PUB** SECRET MODE **DEV** THE CHINESE ROOM **PLAYERS** 1

STILL WAKES THE DEEP

Of trout and terror

Caz McLeary is on the run – from a difficult personal life and an assault charge waiting for him back home in Scotland, and from the situation at his workplace. That's the thing about life: it always gets you in the end.

But forget a clash of personalities or an uninspiring lunch menu; McLeary's workplace problem is far from mundane. An average day aboard this oil rig falling into disrepair was already risky, and then the team aboard drilled into an unknowable terror. There's no fighting it, leaving Caz with no options other than hiding and (what he does best) running.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 13 FEB **PUB** FOCUS ENTERTAINMENT **DEV** DON'T NOD **PLAYERS** 1

BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN

Going long distance

Things are complicated between Red mac Raith and Antea Duarte – mainly because Antea no longer dwells on the mortal plane. Before her departure, both were Banishers (spirit mediums, exorcists), though that doesn't make such a significant shift any easier. For a start, Antea has always loathed spirits, and so the pair search for a way to return her to the land of the living. This action RPG sees the lovers combining abilities from both sides of the veil, and making tough, story-altering choices throughout their quest to retrieve what they've lost. Is this an impossible love? Perhaps it's a matter of perspective.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 26 JAN **PUB** SEGA **DEV** RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO **PLAYERS** 1

LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

Yakuza gets a beach episode

While for us it'll have been a few months since we left Kiryu in a Hawaiian church in Like A Dragon Gaiden, it's only seconds for him as we pick back up the series star's thread in Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth, which begins our time with the game.

Naturally, our favourite former yakuza can't just be allowed to take a holiday. Having faked his death to protect his loved ones, he's now under the thumb of the Daidoji, a shadowy organisation which helps him keep his secret – for a price. His trip to the sunny island has come with some caveats, as a phone call pointedly reminds him as he leaves the church: he's got to track someone down.

It's an important introduction more for how it sets Kiryu up as a chess piece in the complex drama unfolding in Hawaii than for the mission itself. While the hero of the first six Yakuza games (this is the eighth) made a cameo in the soft reboot that was 2020's Yakuza: Like A Dragon, here he's a full-on secondary protagonist, standing alongside the ever-lovable lead of that earlier game, Ichiban Kasuga.

DRAGON'S TREASURE

Given the last game made such a big deal out of introducing Kasuga as the new series star, Kiryu's return, even to share the spotlight, is interesting. While it certainly helps that the gruff Dragon Of Dojima remains incredibly popular, that's not all that went into the decision to bring him back; it's about the story the team wanted to tell.

"The reason why we reintroduced Kiryu is because he is indispensable as a legendary member of the Kyokudo [Yakuza] when describing the fate of the Kyokudo after they were dismantled in Yakuza: Like A Dragon," shares Hiroyuki Sakamoto, Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio's chief producer. Despite the Western name change (from Yakuza to Like A Dragon – which was always the Japanese title), the series can't get away from the gangsters. The in-universe dismantling of the multi-faction criminal organisations has opened up new tales to tell about where that's left the criminal world. "Since Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth follows a theme about the question of what has been Gokudo (Yakuza) and what is to come for Gokudo (Yakuza), these were perfectly portrayed by Kiryu and his backstory, which has a lot of history behind it," continues Sakamoto.

But Infinite Wealth isn't the first time the series has adopted multiple protagonists. Yakuza 4 had four, while Yakuza 5 had five; it's a series with no shortage of great characters to focus on. "This is because Like A Dragon emphasises and underscores the act of taking on great and terrible evils all whilst uniting with friends in the process," says Sakamoto. And here the threat is again promised to be one that couldn't be faced by a single person. [Having] "co-leads also allows players to engage with different perspectives in the game, enriching the story we are able to tell, and allowing players to enjoy varied gameplay experiences," he says.

"LIKE A DRAGON EMPHASISES AND UNDERSCORES THE ACT OF TAKING ON GREAT AND TERRIBLE EVILS ALL WHILST UNITING WITH FRIENDS IN THE PROCESS."

2024 PREVIEW

The Geodancer attacks with agile flips, and can groove the elements to their will.

1 Kasuga and Kiryu can team up to deliver a punishing beatdown. Move two characters close to each other to pull off a combo attack. 2 Yutaka Yamai is the patriarch of his own syndicate. But what's his connection to Kasuga's missing mother? 3 Former cop Adachi returns, and is more flexible than ever. Not bad for a mature gentleman.

Following Kiryu's church call, we take control of him as he shakes down informants for information about the Japanese lady he's been asked to find, only to stumble on the news that a Japanese man with wild hair was arrested for wandering around Honolulu beach with his buttocks (and more) exposed, before breaking out of jail. We all have that friend who we immediately know is responsible for trouble, and Kiryu is indeed no different, meeting up with Kasuga as he investigates.

HAWAII VICE

As the pair look for somewhere to lay low, they realise Kiryu's not the only one searching for someone. Kasuga's in Hawaii to reconnect with his long-lost mother – but, despite the mysterious invitation he received, he didn't get a warm welcome when he showed up at the address (hence his cheekscapade). Coincidence this is not, as Kiryu and Kasuga realise they're looking for the same woman. Needless to say, a complicated conspiracy is about to draw them both in – but will they find themselves on opposing sides when the dust clears?

"Hawaii was chosen as a new setting for the series because it fits perfectly within our narrative arc," explains Sakamoto. "It serves as the most effective place for Kasuga's mother to hide, having been chased by the Japanese Yakuza for many years. We did consider other island locations, but Hawaii has a very strong link to Japanese culture, being a place with one of the largest Japanese populations outside of Japan, plus the Hawaiian setting matched with the storyline, so it seemed like a good location to expand the franchise to, allowing us to mix the familiar with the new."

And what a location it is! With the sun shining down (and occasional summer showers), the vibes are immaculate. When we're let off the leash to explore, we turn and run straight into the sea – and imagine our surprise when Kasuga whips off his shirt and starts swimming into the crystalline waters. Dive in a glowing spot and you can stuff your trunks with trash (to turn in for rewards – why not help keep Hawaii tidy?). Meanwhile, returning to the streets, the Segway-like street surfers allow the party to wheel from point to point if you're tired from swimming. Infinite Wealth is ambitious in scope (the map is huge), with loads of variety throughout the different districts of Honolulu.

FUN IN THE SUN

While Infinite Wealth is dropping on PS4 and PS5, the newer hardware truly allows the game to shine (and it's what we play our demo session on). "Simply achieving both higher resolution and higher frame rates stand as prime examples," says

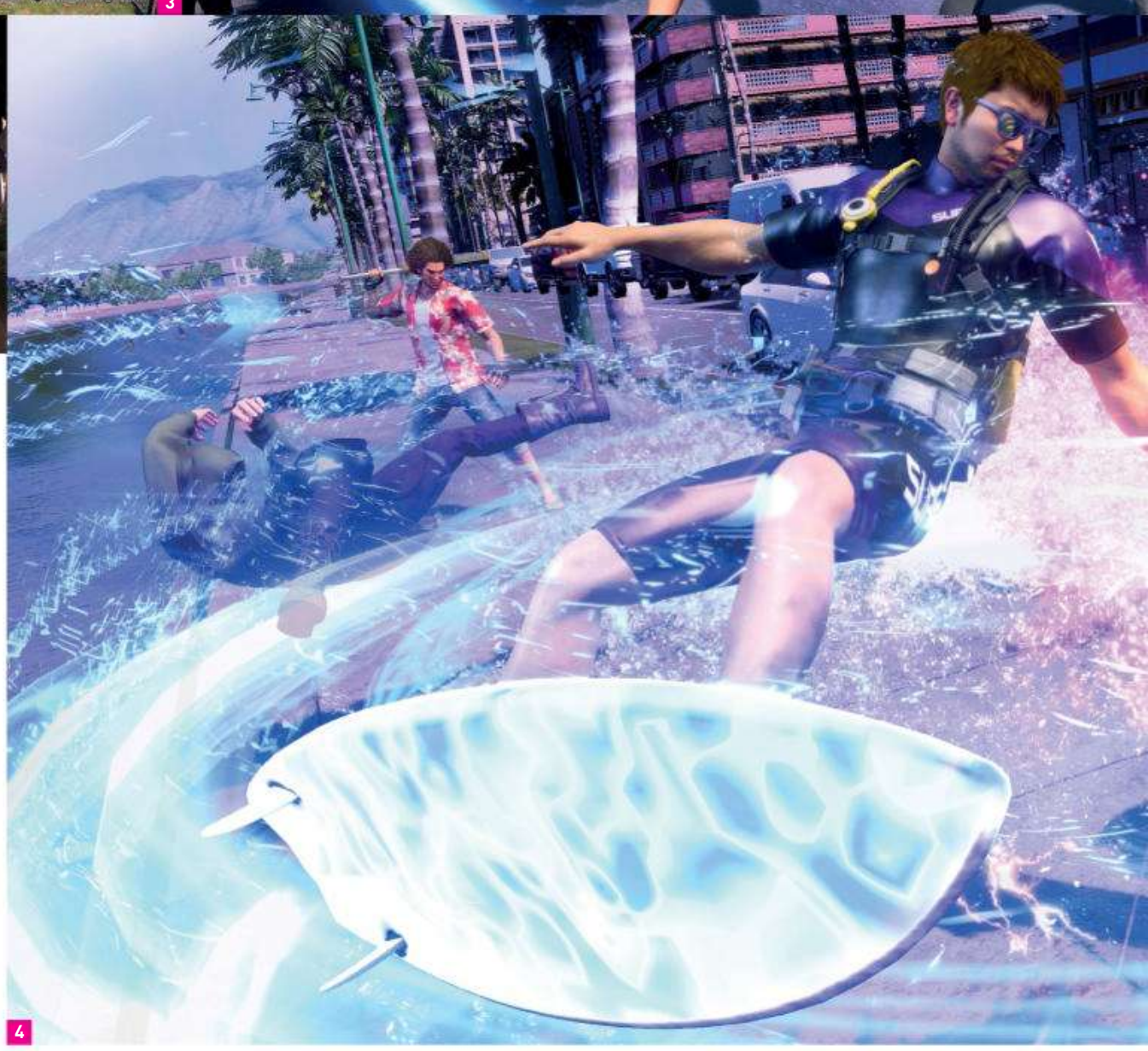
Sakamoto on the technical benefits of PS5, "but the Like A Dragon series is also unique with its unusually large number of in-game objects present." Everywhere you look there's something to see – some of it commented on by the party, such as fire-breathing street performers. PS5 allows more objects to be rendered, better bringing Hawaii to life. "This advancement not only contributes to elevated graphics but also means the Like A Dragon series can convey more intricate and nuanced details," says Sakamoto.

The setting also provides fresh inspiration for sub-stories – often-comedic little tales that sit alongside the dramatic core story. "Balancing the blend of side-stories and main story beats is a nuanced and deliberate process. Because of the dramatic main story, we highly value variety and light-heartedness in the side-stories," says Sakamoto. "We construct the side-stories to provide comedic relief whilst simultaneously crafting the main story beats with depth."

> "HAVING A TEAM THAT HAS A SENSE OF PLAYFULNESS AND HUMOUR IS KEY."

In part, Sakamoto says, it comes from listening to fan feedback. But the planning team also inject their own experiences into making them, like the 'Saved By Kindness' substory, which is based on a real-life T-shirt scam that one of the staff had encountered. "In these cases, real-life inspiration enhances the relatability of the side-stories within the game," he says.

Hawaiian flavour makes for new experiences. Literally, in the case of one mission that has Kasuga filling in as a waiter at the last minute, having to learn local dishes and remember all the orders. Another has you riding the tram while taking photos of perverts for the police. Another, beach-set, sub-story tasks you with delivering a love letter to a boy buried in the sand, only to find the whole class embedded up to their necks. What follows is a logic puzzle, requiring you to figure out



1 Say goodbye to your real life and aloha to hours upon hours in Dodoko Island, a kind of Stardew Valley-like resort builder that seems to be endlessly deep. 2 Hawaii has both sunny, summery beaches and bustling nightlife. 3 Luck takes a back seat in this revised battle system that gives you more tactical control than ever. 4 Hang loose! New pal Eric Tomizawa can drench foes while kitted out as a surfer.

» the exact position of your target to make sure the right person gets the missive. We're left wondering what the team's research trips must have been like to result in these romps!

FIGHTING TALK

But back to our double dragon duo: our demo is capped off with Kiryu and Kasuga heading to Kasuga's mother's address to investigate, only to find it empty… and for the Yamai Syndicate to show up.

What's worse, Kiryu's unwell and would rather avoid a scuffle with their patriarch, the crowbar-wielding Yutaka Yamai. But we discover it's a family in name only, as taxi driver and henchman Eric Tomizawa has been forced into working for Yamai. It only takes a touch of Kasuga's kind-heartedness to turn Tomizawa from foe to friend, making our final boss fight three-against-one.

The turn-based fighting is as silly as ever. Tomizawa's ultimate attack, for instance, has him loading up enemies into his taxi and literally driving them to the hospital before it explodes. "[The team are] really good at coming up with quirky ideas!" says Sakamoto. "Having a team that has a sense of playfulness and humour is key in creating the outlandish and entertaining attacks and moves we see in this new title."

But combat is more than a repeat of the last game's stuffed with even sillier ideas, it's been tweaked to reward tactical thinking. Previously, "the element of luck was strong" says Sakamoto of getting the upper hand in battle. "When developing Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth, we believed that luck shouldn't be so strongly pushed and we dialled back the emphasis on it, instead focussing on giving more control to the player and [giving them] more opportunities for exploitation."

One simple example comes from Tomizawa: we douse Yamai with car-wash water, then follow up on our next turn with a car-battery-powered lightning attack. As you unlock more 'jobs' (here inspired by tourist trips, like surfer, Hawaiian dancer, and more), the opportunity for tactical interplay increases.

Scrapping is also more dynamic, with more emphasis on movement and positioning. Ping-ponging enemies into allies for extra damage

is easier now you have control over direction, and standing next to allies or weapons allows for team-up and environmental attacks respectively.

It's underscored by Kiryu's ultimate attack, Dragon Resurgence, which hands us real-time control as he breaks the turn-based UI apart and doles out a rapid-fire beatdown. "We hope that players enjoy this unique meeting of both protagonists' signature combat styles," says Sakamoto. Mashing ▢ and △, our barrage is intercut with Yamai's face being crushed by Kiryu's fist. It's familiar but fresh. When in Hawaii, we'll be doing as the dragons do.

TSUKIHIME: A PIECE OF BLUE GLASS MOON

FORMAT PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** ANIPLEX INC
DEV TYPE-MOON, HUNEX **PLAYERS** 1

A troubled family history, a string of murders, and vampire royalty, baby! With a blend that tempting, it's unbelievable that this classic visual novel, which debuted in 2000, should only now be receiving an official English-language release. This remake greatly expands the bloody tale, to the point it's been split into two. The two routes in this half see you getting better acquainted with vampire princess, Arcueid, as well as *totally* ordinary high-school student (and sole member of her school's tea ceremony club) Ciel.

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED SOLAR CROWN

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** NACON
DEV KT RACING **PLAYERS** ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

What are Gran Turismo 7 and Burnout Paradise missing? Bragging rights, it seems. This motorhead MMORPG offers all the opportunity to do doughnuts that you'd expect, plus more than a side-order of living large like a socialite. Besides schmoozing in the towering Solar Hotel and exploring all a 1:1 recreation of Hong Kong island has to offer, you'll always be working towards earning your next motor. Everything from drifting to overtaking earns you credits, though you'll have to work at it to claim pristine ride.

SYNDUALITY: ECHO OF ADA

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
DEV GAME STUDIO INC **PLAYERS** ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

Resource scarcity is core to this post-apocalyptic mech game, which pits you against not only other human pilots scrambling for survival, but also xenomorphic beasts known as Drifters. Harvesting AO crystals is a lonely but necessary mission, though your AI companion Magus is always floating along beside you, ready to cheer you up. In addition to the solo story campaign, you'll be able to dive into PvPvE multiplayer – with only so many crystals to be mined, it's kill or be killed whichever way you slice it.

THE OUTLAST TRIALS

FORMAT PSVR2 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** RED BARRELS
DEV RED BARRELS **PLAYERS** 1-4

The horror series that was always in-your-face with its frights takes the perhaps predictable step into VR. This time set during the Cold War, you and up to three other ill-fated chums take on the role of test subjects for the Murkoff Corporation. You're still skulking around in the dark, keeping one beady little eye on what's lurking too close for comfort thanks to night-vision goggles. When avoidance is no longer an option, you can stun or blind your enemies... or close your eyes real tight and hope it will all be over soon.

PACIFIC DRIVE

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** KEPLER INTERACTIVE
DEV IRONWOOD STUDIOS **PLAYERS** 1

Survival gains a set of wheels. In this New Weird exploration game, your trusty station wagon is your constant companion, not only getting you from one area of the Pacific Northwest's Olympic exclusion zone to the other, but protecting you from various bizarre hazards that pop up along the way. Wandering balls of lightning, strange glowing mannequins, and more... we're glad they're out there and we're in here – until a touch too much rough driving means we've got to venture outside our car to make crucial repairs.

VED

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** FULQRUM PUBLISHING
DEV KARACLAN **PLAYERS** 1

This adventure straddles two worlds, following protagonist Cyrus as he discovers the ability to zap between his mundane life and a fantastical floating archipelago. Featuring impactful choices throughout a non-linear story, hand-drawn art, and a turn-based combat system with a roguelite edge, it's a unique beast, even before you get into the soundtrack's blend of folk and hip-hop influences. As Cyrus ducks and weaves between enemy blows, we can't help wondering if this multifaceted RPG will also stick the landing.

FORMAT PS5 ETA 2024
PUB PANIC DEV COAL SUPPER PLAYERS 1

THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE!

It's great up North

The tale of a travelling salesman, even one with an appointment to meet the mayor of a town in Northern England, doesn't sound particularly interesting. When that salesman is suspiciously small compared to literally everybody that he meets, though, and when the story is delivered with bold hand-drawn graphics and huge dollops of absurd humour, there's a chance we might already be looking at GOTY 2024.

The developers firmly thrust their collective tongue into their collective cheek, and describe this as a "slapformer". That's actually a pretty good description. During our short but oh-so-sweet hands-on time we run, jump, slap things, and… that's it. Oh, and we laugh. We laugh a lot.

TGYH! doesn't so much wear its Northern English heart on its sleeve as turn that heart into a joyous full-body leotard. Everybody we meet has a northern accent (often exaggerated slightly for comic effect), and there's plenty of Yorkshire dialect to go around.

Handed a dedicated slap button, you'd better believe that we slap everything we can. The result is often little more than a wobble – even most people don't mind being slapped, simply spouting a bit of cheery dialogue – but that makes

ANIMAL WELL

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** BIGMODE
DEV SHARED MEMORY **PLAYERS** 1

Looking for something different? This might be all the way up your alley, as it seems to be a game determined to avoid easy categorisation. This starts with the graphics. Yes, it's retro-styled pixel art, but it sits somewhere between ye olde Spectrum games and what you might have seen on a NES – with modern effects thrown in.

Gameplay draws inspiration from survival horror in addition to 8-bit adventures like Metroid and Zelda, and it promises to be "interesting and giving back far into the future, without the need for updates", with players discovering new secrets "for years".

EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 6

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** SPRING 2024
PUB D3 PUBLISHER **DEV** SANDLOT **PLAYERS** 1-4

The EDF adventures have always been gaming's equivalent of B-movies. We've seen nothing at all to indicate that the latest entry will differ significantly from what's come before – and that's perfectly fine by us. Overwhelming numbers? Check. Silly story? Check. Even sillier dialogue? Check.

It's all about action, and lots of it. Playing as one of four different soldier types, you'll blast your way through hordes upon hordes of giant ants and other monsters, with more missions and more weapons than the series has ever offered before. You'll soon be screaming "ET go home… in pieces!"

BLACK MYTH: WUKONG

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** TBA 2024 **PUB** GAME SCIENCE
DEV GAME SCIENCE **PLAYERS** 1

With the industry dominated by American, British, and Japanese devs, it's always exciting when a promising game from a different country appears on the horizon. So we're excited for this one, an action RPG developed by a Chinese studio and based on Journey To The West, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature (Romance Of The Three Kingdoms is another). In addition to your trusty staff you'll have access to other weapons, abilities, and equipment, and even spells. You'll need them; a wide variety of creatures are lying in wait, some of which are absolutely *huge*.

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** TEAM CHERRY
DEV TEAM CHERRY **PLAYERS** 1

While it seems like we've been waiting for Silksong forever, it hasn't been *quite* that long, and the release is edging ever closer. Some things will remain the same – that gorgeous art style is unchanged, it's unlikely that the experience will be a pushover, and Christopher Larkin is providing another sumptuous orchestral score – but plenty is new. An unexplored world, over 150 fresh types of enemy, additional moves to use against them, and much more. Finishing the game unlocks a greater challenge in the form of Silk Soul mode, keeping things fresh long after the credits have rolled.

the few unexpected consequences all the more effective. Seeing a huge pair of buttocks poking out of a food van, we *have* to slap them. The result? A shutter slams down, bearing the sign "Closed due to smacky bum bum".

A cry of "Thank goodness you're here!" from one of the townsfolk means that there's a task to be done. In our brief taste of the game, at least, this is never taxing, but always fun (and always involves slapping things). We slap a worm into oblivion, help make a pie the size of a bus, get called "lad" a lot, and get kicked out of a shop called Rog's Veg Hole. In short, we cannot wait for the final thing.

UMAMUSUME: PRETTY DERBY – PARTY DASH

FORMAT PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** CYGAMES **DEV** CYGAMES **PLAYERS** 1-4

Not familiar with Umamusume? Well, it's set in a world in which horses can be reborn as girls while retaining their speed, endurance, and – for some reason – ears and tails. No questions? Good. In Party Dash the 'Slapdash Grand Prix' consists of four events: Hurtling Hurdles, Blazing Baskets, Dodgeball Demolition, and Gourmet Gauntlet. The alliterative athletics are presented with retro-styled pixellated art, and promise simple but over-the-top action with a dash of humour. This may prove the neighsayers wrong.

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** FOCUS ENTERTAINMENT **DEV** SABER INTERACTIVE **PLAYERS** 1-3

We're tempted to make a joke about missing the first 39,999 games, and oh dear we just did. But despite our silliness, there's no denying that this has the potential to be something special whether you're a fan of 40K or not. A grim but strikingly designed world, combined with pleasingly gory combat and a dedication to the narrative, puts this on our radar. With the ability to slay alone or alongside up to two others, sometimes against hundreds of enemies at once, you won't have time to get bored, soldier.

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** BANDAI NAMCO **DEV** FROMSOFTWARE **PLAYERS** TBC

Announced back in February, there's still no release date for this at time of writing, but we expect it to land in 2024. FromSoftware has been coy about details (read: provided precisely none), with the image above all we have to go on. That's been enough to spark fan theories, though. Who's the riding Torrent? The most popular theories are that this is either Miquella (often mentioned but never seen in the main game) or Queen Marika (who bears a resemblance to the rider but may be dead depending on your ending).

PLAY TEAM PICKS

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

Perhaps I'm being a bit predictable, but as I fell in love with Final Fantasy VII way back when, and Final Fantasy VII Remake more recently, the latest addition to the series of remakes/reworkings just feels fated to be up my alley. I can't wait to see those classic moments reimagined, even if I'm anxious about where it's ultimately going!

JESS KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

THE THAUMATURGE

Between Tsukihime's revamp, Bloodlines 2's rise from the dead, and Crow Country's crunchy throwback goodness, 2024 is going to be bloody marvellous. What tickles my shadowy heart most though is The Thaumaturge; an alternate history RPG with a supernatural edge and turn-based fights featuring a timing-based twist – how could I say no?

MIRIAM MCDONALD
OPERATIONS EDITOR

LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

I absolutely loved Ichiban's first adventure – Dragon Quest meets Yakuza? *Perfect*. The Hawaiian setting this time has so much potential for even more pun-tastically-named enemies and new jobs with matching gaudily-printed battle gear. (My money's on a grass skirt.) Will we see Ichi going ham with a pineapple? Delicious.

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

DEATH STRANDING 2

I'm not ashamed to say it, but I'm a sucker for whatever Hideo Kojima does, and while the original Death Stranding proved divisive, I can't wait to see how he continues the story and leverages the power of PS5. Yoji Shinkawa's designs are also always amazing, so I can't wait to see what he's come up with for the sequel. Fingers crossed for more fourth-wall-breaking fun!

RYAN ROBBINS
DESIGNER

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

At this point, who's *not* a fan of the Star Wars universe? Although I must admit the films have been slacking a bit recently. Star Wars has always presented an intriguing dystopian galaxy to explore, however; this time you get a cute little buddy, Nix, who can go and flip switches for you or even grab weapons for you when you're low on ammo. How cool is that?

There's nothing dull or dingy about fighting your way through the Dark Hour in this polished remake. Call on your Persona in a fight and get ready for Mass Destruction.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2 FEB **PUB** SEGA **DEV** ATLUS **PLAYERS** 1

PERSONA 3 RELOAD

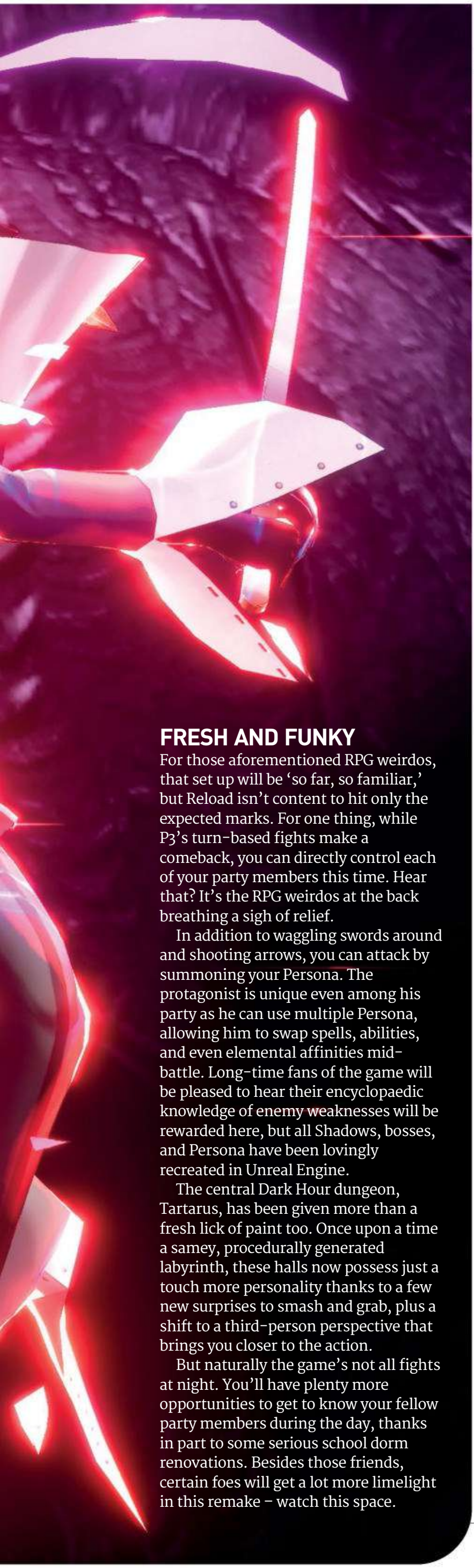
High school never ends

Persona 3's preoccupation with death and despair earned it a special place in the hearts of many RPG weirdos of a certain age (a crowd our own games editor includes herself among). Now, thanks to this ground-up remake, a fresh generation of players can see if they're cut out to join the ranks of the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad.

Why such an intimidating name for a gaggle of highschoolers? Let's get into it: playing as a transfer student returning to Tatsumi Port Island for the first time since a deeply traumatic event years previously, you soon discover this school year has more than a few unusual extracurricular activities in store. Balancing studying for exams with school club responsibilities and hanging out with your pals is tricky enough for an average student – but obviously you're not just an average student.

For a start, you have a whole extra hour to play with. Called the Dark Hour, it lies between the end of the day and the start of a new dawn, but there's no chance to meet up with study buddies here. During the Dark Hour, most people are transformed into unresponsive, obsidian coffins. The few who still wander freely are open to attack by hungry Shadows. This was almost your protagonist's fate, until he unlocked the power to summon Shadows of his own.

"YOUR CHARACTER IS ABLE TO USE MULTIPLE PERSONA."



FRESH AND FUNKY

For those aforementioned RPG weirdos, that set up will be 'so far, so familiar,' but Reload isn't content to hit only the expected marks. For one thing, while P3's turn-based fights make a comeback, you can directly control each of your party members this time. Hear that? It's the RPG weirdos at the back breathing a sigh of relief.

In addition to waggling swords around and shooting arrows, you can attack by summoning your Persona. The protagonist is unique even among his party as he can use multiple Persona, allowing him to swap spells, abilities, and even elemental affinities mid-battle. Long-time fans of the game will be pleased to hear their encyclopaedic knowledge of enemy weaknesses will be rewarded here, but all Shadows, bosses, and Persona have been lovingly recreated in Unreal Engine.

The central Dark Hour dungeon, Tartarus, has been given more than a fresh lick of paint too. Once upon a time a samey, procedurally generated labyrinth, these halls now possess just a touch more personality thanks to a few new surprises to smash and grab, plus a shift to a third-person perspective that brings you closer to the action.

But naturally the game's not all fights at night. You'll have plenty more opportunities to get to know your fellow party members during the day, thanks in part to some serious school dorm renovations. Besides those friends, certain foes will get a lot more limelight in this remake – watch this space.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** BUNGIE **DEV** BUNGIE **PLAYERS** MULTI (ONLINE)

DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE

Going full circle

Capping off the years-long Light And Darkness saga, Destiny's eighth expansion follows in the footsteps of The Taken King, Forsaken, and The Witch Queen – it's got big boots to fill.

Its first big swing is taking you inside The Traveler, the friendly sphere that dominates not just the sky but so much of Destiny's lore. You'll finally discover whether there's anything to Fenchurch Everis' tales about journeying inside The Traveler (though the jury is still out on whether it smells like vanilla) as you blast back an infectious corruption. Besides that, there's a new raid, new episodes, and a selection of Super abilities to acquire. Titans will enjoy hurling axes honed by the Void, Hunters become more deadly thanks to teleporting blades, and Warlocks will watch it all burn thanks to the power of the solar flame.

"DISCOVER WHETHER THERE'S ANYTHING TO FENCHURCH EVERIS' TALES ABOUT JOURNEYING INSIDE THE TRAVELER."

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 18 JAN **PUB** UBISOFT **DEV** UBISOFT MONTPELLIER **PLAYERS** 1

It's got a metroidvania structure with a 2.5D perspective – and you may be thinking you've heard this story before. However, this time you're not playing as the prince. Prince Ghassan's been kidnapped, so the Immortals leap to his rescue, and you play as Sargon, the youngest member of that elite squad. Even so, he's not to be taken lightly. While he favours dual-wielded twin blades, as you explore Mount Qaf you'll get to grips with bows and arrows, aerial acrobatics, and (of course) time-shifting abilities.

ULTROS

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** KEPLER INTERACTIVE **DEV** HADOQUE **PLAYERS** 1

The Sarcophagus is an acid-toned, cosmic realm bursting with life – so why does everything here want to kill you? Caught on the edge of a black hole, this place is a looping prison for the titular demonic presence, and every creature within has their eyes on you in case you throw the cycle off its axis. What follows is a 2D metroidvania built around close-quarters combat that often erupts into sharp spurts of, uh, chunky jam. On the other hand, you're tasked with planting seeds and watching the garden grow, suggesting your role in the cycle is anything but straightforward side-picking.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** DREADXP **DEV** JOHN SZYMANSKI, EVAN SZYMANSKI **PLAYERS** 1

MY FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD

A nightmare on Elmo street

Pupaphobia is the fear of puppets, and if you have this phobia, you absolutely do *not* want this on your wishlist. The Friendly Neighborhood was a hugely popular Saturday morning kids show until, well… it wasn't. Years after it went off air, it starts broadcasting again without warning. This time though, there's a very dark twist, and the studio remains closed down. Something is very wrong.

Which, of course, is where you come in! As Gordon the repairman, you investigate the studio and find that things are very strange indeed. Puzzles are dotted all over the place, puppets have come to life and are determined to kill you, that sort of thing. Don't even *think* about trying to put your hand up their bottoms.

There are some strong Resident Evil vibes here. The first-person perspective and environmental puzzles bring to mind the last few Resis, but despite this, My Friendly Neighborhood has more in common with the classic tank control games. The industrial style of the studio, combined with sound design that almost entirely eschews music in favour of ambient noise and enemy barks, creates a slightly unnerving atmosphere.

HURT AND BURNY

You'll hear the deranged puppets well before you see them, their loud, high-pitched jabbering acting as a warning that you need to be on your guard. There's combat – we get to use a pistol-style weapon and a shotgun-style weapon, which seem to use some sort of paper as ammunition – but this certainly isn't the focus of the game. The puppets can take a surprising amount of punishment, and ammo can be hard to scrounge. Also à la Resident Evil, they'll get back up when you re-enter the area unless you deal with them via a rare resource (in this case, sticky tape to wrap them up in).

> "DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT TRYING TO PUT YOUR HAND UP THEIR BOTTOMS."

The area we play loops back in on itself, via doorways and routes that (of course) require us to solve puzzles and find key items. Interestingly, manual saves are limited in that you need to spend tokens in order to use the save stations (and also the heal stations, if you need them). Make no mistake, in this unfriendly neighbourhood there *will* be strings to hold you down.

Don't be fooled by the friendly chatter spewing out of their lying mouths.

Real-time or turn-based? You decide. We imagine the former will make dealing with typical mobs swifter.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** MID 2024
PUB NIS AMERICA **DEV** NIHON FALCOM **PLAYERS** 1

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS THROUGH DAYBREAK

A new dawn in Calvard

As one Trails ends, another begins. The continent of Zemuria is vast, and the next arc takes us to the Republic Of Calvard, a nation undergoing unprecedented economic prosperity but also experiencing tensions over immigration, and with political reforms in the headlines. Against this backdrop you play as Van, who works as a spriggan – essentially a jack-of-all-trades where you might be detective, negotiator, or bounty hunter.

Unlike bracers, they're an underground profession and don't have any scruples about who their clients are, as long as the price is right. Van's quite a contrast from fresh-faced idealists like Rean or Lloyd, then. But a case he takes from the mysterious Agnès sets them both on an unexpected adventure.

HYBRID THEORY

This new arc in a land Trails fans have not previously visited presents the perfect opportunity to shake up the series' combat with the new Action Time (AT) Battle system. It's basically a hybrid of real-time action similar to that in Falcom's Ys and traditional turn-based battles, with the option to seamlessly switch between modes, although bosses will remain turn-based. That also means battles all happen on the field without warping into a separate arena.

The Trails games are known for their rich worldbuilding so there'll be plenty of characters to interact with in the city of Edith. Another layer of depth comes from the Alignment system, which can trigger unique events and dialogue depending on who you've allied yourself with. It promises a lengthy, story-packed road ahead, but it's a route that can still call itself Trails.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** PRIVATE DIVISION **DEV** EVENING STAR **PLAYERS** 1

PENNY'S BIG BREAKAWAY

Spinning new tricks

A 3D platformer might not be what you'd expect from a studio founded by key members of the team behind Sonic Mania, but there are some similarities between this and that as the eponymous heroine is on the run from an army of blue penguins. She's paired with a sentient yo-yo (named, well, Yo-Yo), so spin attacks will be plentiful. Feed Yo-Yo snacks and it transforms temporarily, becoming a grapple point so Penny can swing to other platforms, or growing into a giant ball to smash through obstacles and enemies, helping her navigate the colourful world of Macaroon.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** TBC **PUB** DEVOLVER DIGITAL **DEV** NOMADA STUDIO **PLAYERS** 1

NEVA

Going wolf mode

If arty side-scroller Gris focussed on its theme of grief to the detriment of the action, then Nomada Studio's follow-up appears more substantial. Its hand-drawn art style still looks luscious, realising a world that's plagued with a curse that also leads to the death of the wolf that was a loyal companion to a young woman called Alba. Instead of being absorbed by her grief, she takes up the blade to fight the shadowy entities sweeping over the land. She also has a wolf cub in her charge; we expect their relationship to evolve to an emotional level on a par with The Last Guardian. Tissues out!

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** 11 BIT STUDIOS **DEV** 11 BIT STUDIOS **PLAYERS** 1

THE ALTERS

Your own worst enemy

There simply aren't enough hours in the day – so what if you could cheat time itself? In this genre mashup of survival-meets-management, that's exactly what got you into this mess. In a resource-depleted future, Rapidium is the solution to many of the Earth's problems. Harvest coming up short? Plant a fresh crop, douse the plants in time-warping Rapidium, put on a cuppa, and then reap what you've sown after your fresh brew. The stuff's a magic bullet – as long as you can get more of it.

Protagonist Jan Dolski is the man the powers-that-be shot out into space to mine more. Unfortunately, his vessel has crash-landed on a desolate planet, killing the rest of his crew and leaving him at the mercy of an always-approaching, deadly sunrise. But that's all right – everything Jan needs to survive is already right here.

To make up the missing labour force, you need to cook up some clones. Rapidium speeds them through all of the developmental stages that are not immediately useful to your current predicament, and your onboard quantum computer fills in the gaps from there. Offering what's called the Tree Of Life simulation, the computer simulates an alternate life for each of your clones, bestowing unique skills and memories of a life that did not happen upon them. However, just because their experience to date isn't real, that doesn't mean it can't present very real problems.

ME, MYSELF, AND I

Living with roommates is bad enough, but it's even worse here: your roomies are all alternate-timeline versions of yourself, making them technically both siblings and colleagues – truly a nightmarish combination.

One of the first freshly baked clones you can encounter is the miner, an alter of Jan with simulated memories of a life

The Alters imagines a truly horrifying futuristic scenario in which the only person you can rely on is yourself.

where he never left his hometown, let alone his planet, instead adopting the same profession as his father.

Unfortunately, the way he remembers it is that his chosen career ended up costing him his arm – and he's just woken up with it reattached as though nothing ever happened. In between assigning the miner various duties around your vessel, you'll also have to reckon with his very particular case of phantom limb syndrome (that is, the lost limb is back in the room with him), and his reliance on painkillers to manage his symptoms.

> "YOUR ROOMIES ARE ALL ALTERNATE-TIMELINE VERSIONS OF YOURSELF."

Resources are scarce, especially after cloning a fresh mouth to feed, so it's up to you whether you can spare the medication… though even if you can, the miner's simulated history of substance abuse may make you pause in your decision making.

If you choose to deny the miner his requested pain meds that's far from the end of it. Some time later, the light of that deadly dawn still advancing, you may find him taking matters into his own hands and lopping off the offending limb himself. Who knew Jan had that in him?

THREE MORE IN THE WORKS

UNDER NIGHT IN-BIRTH II SYS:CELES

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 25 JAN **PUB** ARC SYSTEM WORKS
DEV FRENCH BREAD **PLAYERS** 1-2 LOCALLY, 1-9 ONLINE

We could try to decode every syllable of that title, but ultimately it's going to take up more space than we have here. What you actually need to know is that this is a seriously swish 2D anime fighter featuring rollback netcode and a roster of 24 children of the Hollow Night duking it out with a collection of truly improbable weapons. Sys:Celes also promises to cap off a wild story that involves reincarnation and magical powers known as EXS, as well as interdimensional *and* invisible beasts.

EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 23 APR **PUB** 505 GAMES
DEV RABBIT AND BEAR STUDIOS **PLAYERS** 1

If four's a crowd, we can't say what this is – a mosh pit? Led by Yoshitaka Murayama, the director of the first two Suikoden games back in the late '90s and the creator of the hero-collecting RPG series, Eiyuden carries the torch forward as spiritual successor. The scene is set in Allraan, a land of many people (elves, humans, and beast men included) under threat from the Galdean Empire. Unlikely heroes emerge from all over, coming together as the titular hundred heroes – if you can find them.

FUNKO FUSION

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** 10:10 GAMES LTD
DEV 10:10 GAMES LTD **PLAYERS** 1-4

Funko is looking to gobble up Lego's lunch with this foray into videogames. Featuring properties geared towards adult audiences such as The Thing, Shaun Of The Dead, and the Umbrella Academy, the roster here is chock-full of characterful abilities to throw out during combat and exploration. Whether you're creeped out by their beady little eyes or have a whole shrine dedicated to these vinyl figurines, if you've ever had a bizarrely specific daydream of a Simon Pegg caricature wrestling a Jurassic Park dino, Funko's got you covered.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 26 JAN **PUB** BANDAI NAMCO **DEV** BANDAI NAMCO, ARIKA **PLAYERS** 1-2

TEKKEN 8

Bandai Namco is definitely Tekken things seriously

When Street Fighter 6 burst onto the scene, it not only proved itself one of the best entries (*the* best entry?) in Capcom's legendary series, it managed to remain one of the best games released in a year that saw a quite frankly ridiculous number of top-quality experiences. This fight's not over yet, though; if any series can steal Street Fighter's claim to the title of best beat-'em-up of the generation, Tek-kan.

Tekken has always been a slightly slower, more weighty experience, and our time with the beta proves that there are no plans to change this. The slower pace is part of the charm; mistakes are more glaring, counters more satisfying, moves with extra frames of animation before impact more risky. It's immediately familiar to series fans. Still, there's plenty that is new.

One addition to the core experience is the Heat system. Heat can be activated once per round, lasts for ten seconds, and is a new way to potentially turn a seemingly inevitable loss into a win. While your character is in Heat – erm, while Heat is active, all attacks deal recoverable chip damage. This is one way in which the system is designed to encourage aggressive play.

You can instantly consume all Heat with a devastating Heat Smash attack, which might be enough on its own to win you the round. Alternatively, you could surprise your opponent by cancelling an attack or guard into a Heat Dash, rushing them in an attempt to make the most out of your Heat gauge before it runs out. It's a new trick to pull out of your voluminous trousers, in addition to the returning Rage system, which

Feng Wei has a score to settle with Leroy Smith, who defeated him last time.

gives you access to a super-powerful move when your health is almost fully depleted.

I'M JUST TEKKEN

Although Tekken remains a fighter with huge tactical depth, where veterans will inevitably dominate the online modes, the new game will be more accessible than ever for newbies and casual fans. The Special Style controls will make activating combos and special moves easier, never requiring anything more complicated than three taps of the same button. If this sounds game-breaking, or skill-neutralising, fear not. When we go hands-on, we find that as the preprogrammed moves of Special Style render certain tactics and combos impossible, we prefer to stick with the regular controls. It's a great option to have, though.

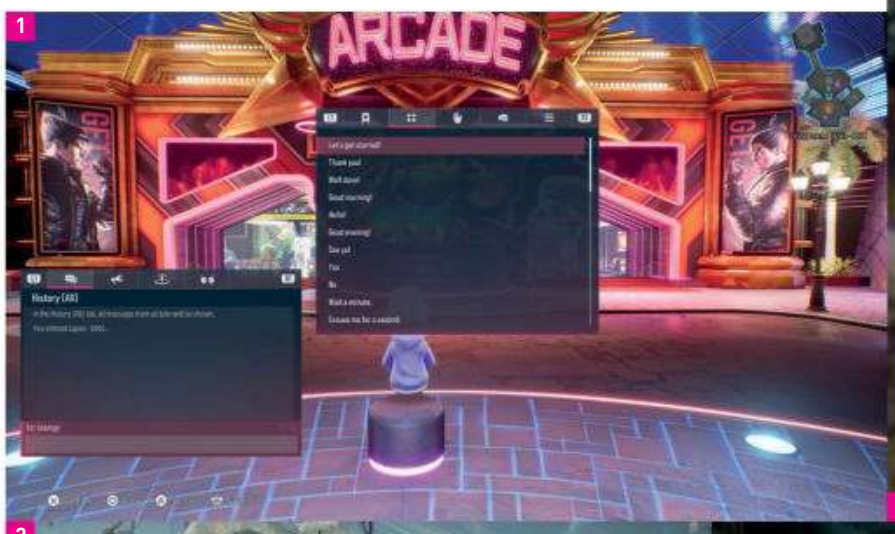
A fresh mode arrives in the form of Arcade Quest. This single-player experience goes meta (and, arguably, slightly surreal). Taking place outside the Tekken universe, in it you and your cutesy avatar buddies find that the local arcade has purchased a baffling number of Tekken 8 machines. Unfamiliar with Tekken, your character is walked through the basics by a fighting game guru at the arcade. It's a glorified tutorial mode, basically, but what's wrong with a bit of glory? Sure beats following dry text instructions on screen after screen.

A tutorial with storytelling bells on it may be, but we know, thanks to in-game footage revealed via IGN, that Arcade Quest will feature a map with different locations, hinting that it's likely to last you a few hours at least. After arriving at Gong, the local arcade, cool guy Max (we know he's cool because he wears a baseball cap, and headphones around his neck) helps you get to grips with the basics by taking control of King.

JIN UP

As the story goes on, you'll encounter other players in the

"TEKKEN REMAINS A FIGHTER WITH HUGE TACTICAL DEPTH."



1 You're about to kick a complete stranger's face in, but that's no reason to be rude. 2 Aren't Raven's shadow clones technically cheating in a 1v1 battle...? Depends on whether we're Raven. 3 Azucena originally "dreamed of becoming the world's best coffee farmer". 4 Bit more exciting than that coffee farming plan, eh Azucena?

» world to put what you've learned into practice, your progress tied into the account levelling that, like in Tekken 7, appears to cross multiple modes. You won't just be learning how to play the game, you'll also be unlocking new titles and customisation items that can be equipped outside this mode.

If Arcade Quest doesn't sound like your punchbag, don't worry, there will still be a traditional story mode (as well as mini character episodes). If you have been following the story of Tekken closely over the years (you have, right?), you will be interested – nay, *excited* – to learn that two long-absent characters will be putting in an appearance. First there's Raven, who skipped Tekken 7 but is back for 8. Still looking suspiciously similar to the Wesley Snipes version of Blade, we're glad to have him back.

More surprising is the appearance of Jin Kazama's mum Jun, last seen in great peril back in 1995 in Tekken 2. Finally making a return after being MIA for over a quarter of a century (in our time, at least), she's set to be reunited with her equally fighty son. She survived the attack by Ogre, then – but where has she been all this time?

OGRE MY HEAD

Your main concern might, quite reasonably, simply be characters and stages. How many heads will there be to kick in, and how many different backdrops can you admire while doing it? Well, stat fan, there will be 32 playable characters and 16 stages. In addition to the previously mentioned prodigal pugilists, returning characters include Leroy (and his dog), Claudio, Kuma, and everybody's favourite freak Yoshimitsu. There's also a brand-new playable character in the form of Azucena, a Peruvian mixed martial artist.

Bandai Namco's decision not to release the latest Tekken on PS4 is interesting. We don't doubt that a last-gen version is possible. It could look great and play very well, in fact. There seems to be a big marketing push for the spectacle of Tekken 8, however, with talk of "high-fidelity graphics", "high-detailed character

models built from the ground up", and even "Hollywood-grade cutscenes". It's a shame PS4 players get left out, but this seems to be one way of Bandai Namco declaring that it's turning everything up to 11 without compromise.

Tekken 7 was fantastic, and the signs are promising that Tekken 8 will take all of that good stuff and build on it. If that's the case – and there's not long until we find out – then we'll be guaranteed one heck of a show. Don't worry Ryu, we'll always have a soft spot in our heart for you, you absolute unit.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** TBC **PUB** KONAMI **DEV** KONAMI, VIRTUOS **PLAYERS** 1

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

A remake to surpass MGS3?

The most surprising thing about this MGS3 redo is that it's the first proper remake in the series (MGS1 reusing Metal Gear 2's best set-pieces aside).

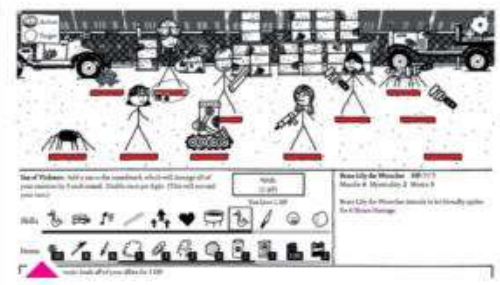
Chronologically the first in the series, it sees Naked Snake (Solid's precursor, who has a very familiar face) infiltrating a Russian base in the 1960s, and taking on his mentor, The Boss, who defected. In-engine demos have been striking for two reasons. For one, the game's Unreal Engine 5 overhaul is gorgeous, and plays especially nicely with the early forest setting (and the critters which inhabit it, which can be caught and eaten by Snake to stay alive). But secondly, the animation and map design are almost uncannily faithful to the original, giving the impression the classic is just camouflaged as a very pretty modern overhaul. But with a skeleton this good (MGS3 is rightly considered one of PS2's greatest games) we certainly won't abandon this mission.

"THE UNREAL ENGINE 5 OVERHAUL IS GORGEOUS, AND PLAYS ESPECIALLY NICELY WITH THE EARLY FOREST SETTING."

BORDER BOTS VR

FORMAT PSVR2 **ETA** TBC **PUB** TEAM17
DEV PAW PRINT GAMES, VTIME **PLAYERS** 1

Manning a border station, you, a human, have to decide which robots to let through, and which to turn away. Inspired by Papers, Please, this is a more colourful and tongue-in-cheek approach in VR that leans into the tactile side of checking over the quirky 'bots who want to get through. Bust out the barcode scanner and beep them, screen them for contraband, or perhaps even deploy the stun gun. But it's not completely dehumanising (pun possibly intended), as you can chat to both these travelling robots and your talkative appliances at home to get a sense of their evolving consciousness. After all, what gives you the right to stand in their way?



SHADOWS OVER LOATHING

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** TBC **PUB** ASYMMETRIC
DEV ASYMMETRIC **PLAYERS** 1

Don't let the black-and-white stick-figure aesthetic fool you, this follow-up to West Of Loathing (which was never released on PlayStation) is packed with more expressive charm and humour than almost any other game we've played. Featuring turn-based combat (which can be turned off), you'll need to wrangle with cosmic horror forces that are invading the exaggerated Jazz-Age-New-York-flavoured Ocean City as you investigate the disappearance of your antiquarian uncle. It's filled with bizarre quests and characters – yourself included. One class you can take on is the Cheese Wizard, who battles using cosmic curds and whey.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** TBC **PUB** SONKA **DEV** SONKA **PLAYERS** 1

HOLSTIN

Holstin to your hat, things are getting scary

Small-town Poland in 1992 isn't an obvious setting for a survival horror. Yet just a few years after the peaceful fall of communism, and with religious fervour in the country at its peak, it has plenty of potential for a rich and unique atmosphere even *before* you throw in monsters and a creeping sense of dread.

Your friend Bartek has gone missing, so you travel to the isolated town where he was last heard from to find out what's going on. There is, of course, evil afoot, and you soon find that, in addition to locating your missing friend, you have a new objective: don't go missing yourself.

We play two demos that, while not experiences lifted directly from the finished game, give us a good idea of what to expect. The first demo is focussed on story and puzzles. The retro-styled graphics and the distance and angle of the camera immediately flag what we should expect. Thus we're not entirely surprised to learn that relatively ordinary items are used in extraordinary ways to open new ways forward, and we're also soon swapping fuses around to divert power to different areas of the house we're in.

> "WE APPRECIATE THE ABILITY TO DISMEMBER ENEMIES."

Have you ever played a classic Resident Evil, and wished you could rotate the camera for a better look at your environment? Well, you can in Holstin! You're actively encouraged to, in fact, as this makes it easier to find items and see interactive elements of the environment.

POLES APART

The second demo is a showcase for dealing with enemies. As this is a survival horror, ammo is a precious resource, so sneaking around will sometimes be to your benefit. If you mess up stealth and get spotted (like

The graphics may pay homage to retro classics, but the lighting is very much modern.

us), you can kick away and/or dodge enemies; but these actions rapidly drain your stamina bar (which doubles as your health), so you can't simply pinball between monsters on your way to the next save point.

Then there's combat. Holding down the aim button switches you to an over-the-shoulder camera. This is occasionally awkward in the cramped corridors of the demo environment, but this isn't a slice of the finished game. Something we certainly *do* appreciate is the ability to dismember enemies, and the different benefits this brings. Shoot off a leg, for example, and the enemy can only slowly crawl towards you; shoot off the head, they can't see; shoot off the arms, they can't attack. Stay calm under pressure, and this could be a great way to conserve ammo.

When it comes to survival horror, Holstin promises to offer up a pleasingly unsettling stew of the familiar and the new. Watch this space, but don't stare into the shadows for too long...

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 28 FEB **PUB** NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS **DEV** NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS, LUCASARTS **PLAYERS** 1

STAR WARS: DARK FORCES REMASTER

The galaxy is Doomed

Long ago (well, the '90s), and in a galaxy far, far away (well, on PC), Star Wars didn't just get its first FPS, but delivered one of the era's very best science-fiction shooters.

And there are no disturbances in the force here as Nightdive Studios – a specialist in revitalising past classics – is behind this remaster. In this chonky Doom-like, you play as Kyle Katarn, a former Imperial turned mercenary, hired by the Rebel Alliance to throw a wrench (and many blaster shots) into the Empire's plans to mobilise its elite Dark Trooper project.

The maze-like levels, hefty weapons, and slick movement feel delightfully old-school, and although Dark Forces has been prettied up it's still unmistakably a retro game. Which is what we love – it wouldn't be the same without the slightly over-compressed voice acting.

"THE MAZE-LIKE LEVELS, HEFTY WEAPONS, AND SLICK MOVEMENT ALL FEEL DELIGHTFULLY OLD-SCHOOL."

ALONE IN THE DARK

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 16 JAN **PUB** THQ NORDIC **DEV** PIECES INTERACTIVE **PLAYERS** 1

The granddaddy of survival horror makes a luxurious return with this reimagining of the original title, now with an over-the-shoulder perspective. Still, there's no overthinking it – you're alone and in the dark of a southern gothic mansion with some creepy ghoulies out to get you. *You* being either detective Edward Carnby (David Harbour) or his employer Emily Hartwood (Jodie Comer). While the house does have some inhabitants, they've all gone a bit strange, only providing marginal assistance in your search for the missing Jeremy Hartwood.

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** ATLUS **DEV** ATLUS, STUDIO ZERO **PLAYERS** 1

This one's been in development for ages – Atlus isn't taking any chances its first brand-new RPG series in years. Still, with veteran talent from the Persona games working on it, there's plenty that's familiar here, from a stylish combat system to wonderful character designs (one of your party members is a weird wombat thing). It mixes a European fantasy style of elves, fairies, and the like with similarly Euro-gothic architectural styles, mixed with more out-there body horror beasts and steampunk skyships. A unique class based system with rewind mechanics freshens up battles.

Where's Wander when we really need him? This colossal enemy's going to be a challenge to beat.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024 **PUB** CAPCOM **DEV** CAPCOM **PLAYERS** 1 (WITH SOCIAL FEATURES)

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

Because wyvern not?

With only so much money you can spend and hours to play, gaming has had its fair share of cult classics over the years, games with a small but devoted group of fans. And few in recent memory feel as consistently championed as Dragon's Dogma. First released in 2012 on PS3, and receiving a Definitive Edition a year later on PS4, it's finally getting the sequel fans have hoped for for years.

So why has it taken so long to make a followup? "I really wanted to be able to make a sequel right after the game came out, so sorry for making everyone wait so long," says Hideaki Itsuno when we ask his thoughts on the years of community championing. "I've been so grateful to see so many fans appreciate the quality of the game and support it for so many years. […] Having fans support the game – both inside Capcom and out! – is definitely something that helped push the project towards realisation."

TAKING FLIGHT

All the first game's little eccentricities are remaining intact for Dragon's Dogma 2, with the devs leaning into what fans love rather than pivoting into the mainstream. One of these is the grounded nature of the world, and the way you and your party move through it and clash with enemies big (and we mean *big*) and small.

Itsuno considers the sense of scale and realism a core part of the series' identity. "Yes, I approach the design of the game's world by thinking about what it would really be like if you woke up tomorrow to find yourself in a fantasy world, and that is something that I think is reflected in every detail of the game," he says.

That means things like steel clashing with steel have impact, tense clashes putting you squarely in the moment. But moments such as stumbling and rolling down a slope in a cave or dangling from a griffin as it takes off into the air also provide a lot of opportunity for slapstick comedy. "The game is probably 50% moments like that!" shares Itsuno.

"We held multi-day sessions where the team came up with ideas for things that could happen in the game, and the funniest ideas were always the ones people came up with when our work kept us up late at night," Itsuno continues, laughing. That playful joy can be felt in the game, where these moments enhance the mature core story rather than detract from it. "When we actually went to implement those ideas, we put aside the question of 'Can we really put something this silly in the game?' and put as many of them as possible in it. I hope you enjoy experiencing all these fun moments when you play the game!"

Going for the eyes is a good tactic. Getting to the eyes is more difficult.

AND MY AXE

In our own hands-on, we're plopped into the map without much guidance. But even without much in the way of obvious waypoints, the world seems to guide us into more than a few adventures, and intense battles occur naturally when we come across savage beasties. "Balancing that with playability was a tough task, but I hope you'll find we've achieved it in the game beautifully," Itsuno says.

Pawns return to help nudge you towards points of interest. They did the same in the first game, but they're fleshed out here. An AI party of adventurers, they're other players' creations summoned into your world, and many will join and leave your group as you go. "We worked to increase not just the number of different voice lines for the pawns, but also the variety of different situations they would respond to," explains Itsuno, "so that you really feel that it's your unique Arisen who raised this particular pawn and that they are a true friend who is by your side on your adventure, giving you words of advice and encouragement. Thanks to the last ten years of technological advancement, we were able to achieve that, I think."

Dragon's Dogma 2's world calls you to adventure, and your trials and errors will feel like your own.

"THE FUNNIEST IDEAS WERE ALWAYS THE ONES PEOPLE CAME UP WITH WHEN OUR WORK KEPT US UP LATE."

Your combat classes, vocations, have been also overhauled. Not only has Strider been split into the more specialised Thief and Archer, but every vocation and hybrid vocation has been crafted to feel more unique. "The more of an all-rounder you make a vocation in terms of attack speed and critical distance, the less fun it is to feel like you're playing a particular kind of role," explains Itsuno. "By making each of them feel more special, I hope that players will feel more motivated to improve and to take on the role of their given vocation within the game's world."

From cities to outskirts, there's always room to go rogue.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 2024
PUB UBISOFT **DEV** MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT **PLAYERS** 1

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

Shooting first

Sure, you could roll your eyes at yet another open world game from Ubisoft. But for a certain type of Star Wars fan Outlaws is ticking all the boxes. It's the first *Star Wars* open world, you're playing as a Han Solo-style scoundrel, and you've got the goal of pulling a daring space robbery. We have a good feeling about this.

And in case you're feeling cynical, this isn't just slapping a licence on standard Ubi-fare. Massive is building the game in its Snowdrop Engine, meaning we'll get something closer to the likes of The Division 2 and (the imminent) Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora. These space worlds will be worth exploring.

FAR, FAR AWAY

And what worlds they are! As Kay Vess, your mission to pull off the ultimate heist will take you, critter companion Nix, and oddly sexy droid ND-5 (wearing *only* a trenchcoat, the effect of which is to make him appear more naked than unclothed droids) to a number of planets, including new outer rim planet Toshara, where you'll zip around on speeder bikes, and fan favourites like Tatooine, Cantonica (home of the Canto Bight casino), and mountainous outlaw safe haven Kijimi City.

Naturally, Kay's a roguish gunslinger, but as she's a regular human you'll need to pick her approach to encounters more cannily than you would for a Jedi. Which means weighing up whether to go in all-blasters-blazing or take a stealthier approach, aided by Nix. Either way, this heister's going to steal a lot of your time.

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 8 FEB **PUB** SONY **DEV** ARROWHEAD GAME STUDIOS **PLAYERS** 1-4

HELLDIVERS 2

Squashing some bugs

The chaotic multiplayer bug-blasting action of the first game is intact here, as is the tongue-in-cheek Starship Troopers-esque 'ooh-ra' gung-ho. Yet Helldivers 2 is also a departure, and it's all a matter of perspective. Literally. The top-down viewpoint has been brought right down to make this third-person. The increase in fidelity to support this makes everything more of a spectacle, and makes the insectoid enemies more threatening thanks to them being in your face. Best enjoyed with friends, you'll need to co-ordinate the likes of turrets and weapon drops to expertly exterminate the hordes.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **ETA** 8 MAR **PUB** SEGA **DEV** VANILLAWARE, ATLUS **PLAYERS** MULTI (PVP MODE)

UNICORN OVERLORD

Bucking the trend

Every Vanillaware game feels ambitious and luxurious, thanks in part to an unmistakable art style and a willingness to switch genres. Here the studio has teamed up with Atlus to craft a tactical RPG with huge scope.

As exiled prince Alain, you journey across the five kingdoms of Fevrith, accumulating an army to help you retake your throne. Which means befriending over 60 optional party members as you trot around the open world, where it's possible to encounter some plot threads in any order, getting into scrapes as you amass your forces. Eat your heart out, Suikoden!

2025 AND BEYOND

What does the future of gaming hold?

The new Mass Effect's trailer spotlighted this swish new coat (could it be an upcoming merch store addition or something more?)

There are over 60 games stuffed into what you just read, and it was a struggle to fit in everything we wanted to include! While there are still a lot of question marks about what some of gaming's blockbustiest studios are working on, we've still got more than enough great games to look forward to, many from some fab indie studios.

In fact, there are a lot of question marks hanging over a lot of the game industry at the moment. While 2023 was a great year in terms of game releases, a fraught global economy has led to unprecedented studio closures and layoffs, and a lack of investment. By the time we get to 2025 there may be some big changes afoot in the industry.

Unfortunately a lot of the far-off titles we always look forward to are a part of this. Bioware just laid off some of its most experienced veteran talent, and yet is still teasing a **NEW MASS EFFECT** and **DRAGON AGE: DREADWOLF**.

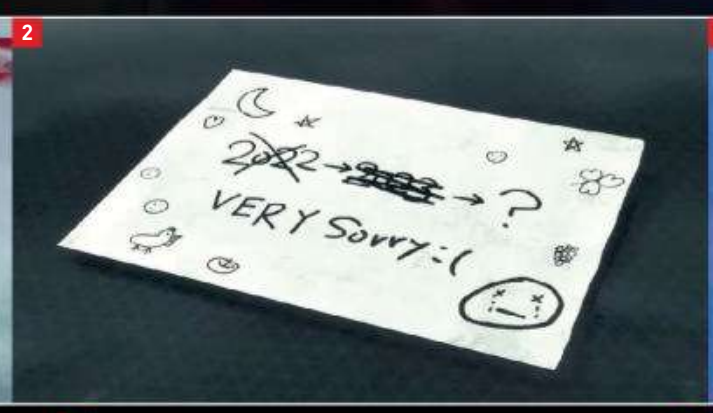
"WE'VE GOT MORE THAN ENOUGH GREAT GAMES TO LOOK FORWARD TO."

The same goes for (the Sony-owned) Destiny developer Bungie, which also doled out layoffs. Its live-service game **MARATHON** is rumoured to have been pushed back to 2025. It's not the only Sony studio affected, with its upcoming swathe of live service games seemingly set for re-evaluation, so who knows what that means for the likes of **FAIRGAME$** and **LONDON STUDIO'S UNTITLED GAME**. Telltale was hit as well, but says that **THE WOLF AMONG US 2** is still happening. Embracer Group's many studios may well have been hit the worst (that's the problem with constant consolidation), though it seems that **STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC REMAKE** is still being worked on, albeit after some setbacks.

Even Ubisoft just went through a round of layoffs, though the feudal Japan-set **ASSASSIN'S CREED RED** and the witchy **ASSASSIN'S CREED HEXE** do feel set in stone (even so, we wonder if we'll ever hear more on the remakes of **SPLINTER CELL** and **PRINCE OF PERSIA: SANDS OF TIME REMAKE**).

It's not all doom and gloom, though, as the rest of our feature shows. Just not a great time for gazing into the crystal ball at the distant future. But, looking into that orb, **GRAND THEFT AUTO 6** (more on that next issue) is sure to be one of the biggest releases of perhaps the decade, and Insomniac Games' **MARVEL'S WOLVERINE** is sure to impress on PS5 in a way only games from that studio can. Heck, we're even looking forward to **SILENT HILL F** as a Japan-set reinvention of the iconic psychological horror series (though we'll admit the interactive TV-style Silent Hill Ascension you may have seen advertised on your PS5 menu was abysmal). And what is going on with Capcom's astronaut action game **PRAGMATA**?

If you're reading this, you're most likely pretty switched on to the game industry, and the future of gaming is going to need that savviness. The bonus-chugging suits up top would love for you to get excited about CG trailers for far-off projects while they simultaneously cut off the people who make the stuff you love. It's a reminder to support the creatives – follow the next projects of those indies you love, pay attention to the studios that lift up their teams, and pass that on. Then we'll have some years to really look forwards to.



1 Will Bungie's shooter Marathon be an online hit? 2 Pragmata's developers have had fun with its delays. 3 Silent Hill F's Japan setting intrigues us.

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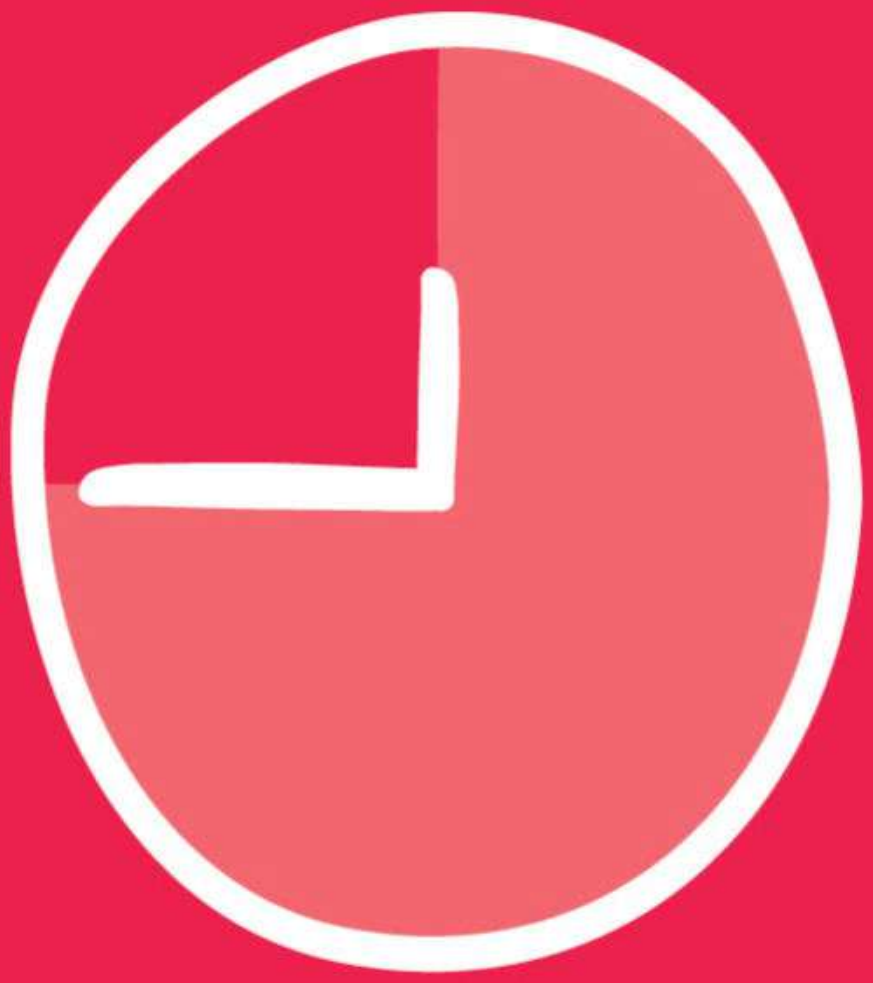

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Reviews

"TRANSLATES PERSONA 5 TO A TACTICS GAME."

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There's always room at the top

HIGHLIGHTS

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Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare III

Stuffed to the ghillies with issues, COD is looking battered

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £69.99
ETA Out now
PUB Activision
DEV Sledgehammer Games
PLAYERS 1 (campaign), 2-64 (online)
LENGTH 4 hrs (campaign)
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable button layout; adjustable haptics, text size, subtitles, and field of view; world motion blur, weapon motion blur, depth of field, reduce tinnitus sound, minimap rotation, crossplay, and gore effects on/off; game colour customisation

Well, this is a fine mess they've gotten us into. While the core multiplayer experience has received a shot in the arm, everything around it has received a shot in the foot. With a rocket launcher. Online has been Call Of Duty's main draw for decades, but that doesn't prevent the overall package from feeling like a spectacularly missed opportunity.

It's unlikely that you've missed the criticisms of the campaign that have been spread far and wide, and chances are everything you've heard is true. The relatively short length (perhaps four hours) isn't a problem for us, even if it is out of step with recent entries. It's the number of mistakes made within that short period that we take issue with.

The odd thing is, there are signs that the original plan was to have a campaign on a *grander* scale than usual. Makarov, the villain of the storyline that included the infamous No Russian mission, returns in a tale with a similarly globetrotting plot. Multiple missions have intros that make a point of referring to different characters taking different routes, yet you only ever take control of one character along one path. Speaking of routes, we have to talk about those Open Combat Missions.

FIRING SQUADDIE

These are essentially sections of a Warzone map with campaign objectives and AI enemies thrown in, and even feature Warzone's scavenging element. Rather than missions that offer exciting possibilities for unique strategies and freedom of approach, they very much feel like bits of gaming Blu Tack hurriedly thrown in to bind the rest of the missions into something resembling a story. The Open Combat Missions are a strong indication that the rumours of rushed development are true.

The linear, more traditional missions are better, but not by enough. Story and action alike keep hitting dull notes that we've heard countless times before (usually in other COD games). To the

A number of existing players have already been vocal about their disappointment with this.

There are signs that the plan was to have a campaign on a grander scale.

1 The obligatory 'death from above' campaign sequence is present and correct (and a bit boring). 2 Sneaky headshots are always fun, we'll admit, but that's nothing new to Call Of Duty. 3 It's actually kind of impressive just how much fun shooting waves of lumbering zombies isn't.

game's credit, however, the story ends with an event that catches us completely off guard, and one late section particularly sticks in the mind. Here, it's intentionally difficult to kill enemies without hitting civilians (for which you are punished with a restart), and all of the enemies are dressed as police officers. The story's clearly trying to say something, but whatever it is, it's drowned out by the sound of executives yelling at their underlings to get the product shipped in time for Q4.

Zombies returns, but it's a half-arsed revival. Gone is the tense atmosphere, along with the bespoke levels and soundtrack. Instead, Warzone is dressed in an unconvincing zombie outfit and kicked out of the door to land in an untidy heap. It's an open world with zombies and other supernatural nasties (and sometimes, oddly, human enemies) full of uninteresting and repeating objectives to grind until you get bored enough to attempt exfil. It is, like the campaign, a series low.

MATTER OF CORPSE

We're relieved, then, when PvP proves to be a complete contrast. It's an odd situation, for sure;

Online play, meanwhile, wants to normalise Nicki Minaj shooting Skeletor in the head.

this is the first entry in the series to launch with precisely no new multiplayer maps, with the ones available at launch famously being drawn from the 2009 Modern Warfare II (and there will even be maps from the 2022 Modern Warfare II). There are obvious advantages for the developer in terms of saving production time and guaranteeing audience familiarity, but there are advantages for the players too.

For one thing, it means that the core modes such as Team Deathmatch are on a rotation of 16 maps from day one, avoiding the issue some past games have had of having too few maps for too long. There's also the undeniable nostalgia rush that longtime fans of the series (us included) get from revisiting remastered versions of maps from what is widely considered one of the best online experiences of the series. A large number of subtle tweaks have been made (a piece of scenery moved or removed here, a change in smoke density there) but these are essentially the same maps that we loved all those years ago.

It's not only the environments that hark back to COD's glory days. Rejecting the series trend of recent years, movement is fast and snappy, without sacrificing that all-important gunfeel. We wouldn't necessarily say that this faster play is *better* – 2019's Modern Warfare was an incredible experience online with weightier movement – but it's an alternative that we're more than happy to see make a comeback here.

BULLET DANCER

Unfortunately, this means that players who insist on sliding and bouncing around everywhere like overexcited toddlers are back. This isn't a side-effect, either, but something Sledgehammer Games is clearly encouraging with perks that enhance aiming while jumping and sliding. It's a dent in the

4 Ah, Scrapyard our old friend, how we've missed doing laps of you while shooting. 5 MWIII has its fair share of campers, and we thoroughly enjoy hunting them. 6 We'll be honest, letting an enemy player get this close wasn't all that wise.

online experience, but not a significant one.

Perhaps encouraging this sort of behaviour was inevitable, as Call Of Duty has become sillier and sillier over the years, and not just by introducing zombies. Offline play wants you to engage with gritty pro-military stories, galvanised by a group of working-class characters who would do anything for one another. Online play, meanwhile, wants to normalise Nicki Minaj shooting Skeletor in the head while Lara Croft bunnyhops nimbly around a corner to throw a Molotov cocktail at Snoop Dogg.

All of the skins we've just mentioned either are or were available to purchase in MWII, and therefore carry over to MWIII – as do any unlocked weapons and attachments. This is great news for anybody who played the previous game before this one (ie virtually everybody). While you'll need to rebuild your custom loadouts, and some equipment needs unlocking again, it's essentially a great way to sidestep the traditional new COD blues where you need to wait several hours for a decent range of weapons.

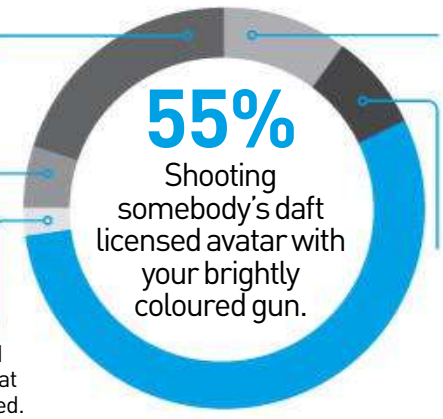
If you're in the minority who enjoys playing Call Of Duty but not for the PvP elements, you'd better steer clear of this one. The rest of us are left with a frustrating package where multiplayer is the best it's been for years, but everything else – which is included to help justify the cost, remember – is insultingly poor. Once is bad enough, but if this becomes a trend, Activision is unlikely to find its audience forgiving.

A series high for PvP, a series low for Zombies and the campaign. Worth it for multiplayer, but paying for the whole package leaves a sour taste. **Luke Kemp**

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: COD: MWIII



20% Legging it round the map at full speed like a heavily armed Sonic.

5% Trying a bunnyhop or slide, because you couldn't resist.

2% Giving Zombies a go, and quickly wishing that you hadn't bothered.

10% Rolling your eyes as you casually take down a slider or bunnyhopper.

8% Wondering exactly what went wrong during the development of the campaign.

MULTIPLAYER

The larger-scale modes return, but they're no better or worse than before. Modern Warfare III shines brightest in 6v6 matches, with the maps (admittedly all ones we've seen before, at launch anyhow) making for good Free For All matches too. There's no sign of Gun Game yet, sadly.

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

HAPTIC FEEDBACK
The DualSense will rumble in time with the shots as you fire, the effect more pronounced on heavier guns.

ADAPTIVE TRIGGER
There's a subtle but important bite point and resistance, mimicking the trigger of a gun, when you fire your weapons.

LOVING/HATING

RIGHT ON TARGET
Classic multiplayer modes like Team Deathmatch and Domination are the best they've been since 2019. Terrific fun.

BOREZONE
We're not huge Warzone fans, to be honest, and we certainly don't welcome its design creeping into the campaign mode.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
In the campaign, grab the major's keycard within 90 secs without being detected.

SILVER
Find and use all weapons in the Open Combat Missions... if you can be bothered.

GOLD
Hit that magical level of 55 in multiplayer for this. Prestige is due with season 1.

The Invincible

Invincible? This review won't hurt a bit then

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB 11 Bit Studios
DEV Starward Industries
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 8 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; text size; hints

The planet Regis III is one of the most gorgeous videogame locations of the year. Its lush orange deserts look hand-painted, its starry skyboxes truly justify the word awesome, and the [SPOILER REDACTED] you discover there are truly, thrillingly alien. What an unmitigated triumph of art design and direction! Shame about the game.

You're Yasna, an amnesiac protagonist (uh-oh) searching for her missing crew. For its opening hours, The Invincible gets by on its stunning scenery and intriguing central mystery. But the revelation of what's happening on Regis III isn't nearly as horrifying as the discovery of how little you get to do. The Invincible is based on a novel. To read a novel, you have to use your hands to turn the pages. You'll find a similar amount of action here.

BOULDERLY GO

Mostly, you're just walking and climbing. Potentially fine, except you walk at a snail's pace and can run for about six steps before getting exhausted. That's relatable, but it makes exploring a hateful chore. Climbing is even duller, consisting of nothing but pushing up on the analogue stick. There's little consistency as to what can be climbed. Many times we fail to clamber over a small pile of rocks because the game wants us to climb a specific steeper rock a few feet away. And the only falling you have to worry about is falling asleep, because there's no way to take damage or die. A strange choice considering the setting is a hostile planet and the story is constantly suggesting you're in grave danger. Death Stranding was also a long trudging walk, but every step through that game's hostile terrain felt earned. This is just a dull, lonely star trek.

Sorry, did we say lonely? You actually have someone nattering in your earpiece constantly. We wouldn't be surprised if there are more words here than in the novel as The Invincible *never* shuts up. Conversations are occasionally entertaining, more often drier than the game's deserts, and in desperate need of an editor. We miss a few plot beats because the endless chatter eventually becomes white noise.

You give directions to a drone a couple times, do some fiddly driving, and flick a lot of switches on various machines, but it's all just so repetitive and monotonous. This is not us merely sniffing at 'walking simulators', a stupid derogatory name for a really exciting genre. We consider Gone Home a classic because it has a well-paced mystery, its runtime isn't padded out with tedious busywork, and the writers knew when to keep schtum and leave us to it. The Invincible frustratingly never gets the balance right. It gives you an incredible planet to explore, but sadly, all we want to do is leave.

> **The only falling you have to worry about is falling asleep – there's no way to take damage.**

It looks absolutely beautiful and the mystery is initially intriguing, but where's the game? Gradually becomes one of the most tedious spacewalks in a long time. **Abbie Stone**

4 PLAY

WOH's glorious aesthetic is dense with text and icons.

World Of Horror

Fear the old gods

INFO

FORMAT PS4
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Ysbryd Games
DEV Panstasz
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 30-60 mins per run
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable difficulty modes and rule sets; colour options; all dialogue is text

Shiokawa, where our hero lives, isn't the only thing that's cursed – this game is too. This 1-bit mono-colour love letter to UI maximalist PC games of old is constantly 'bugging out' with graphical distortions and strange faces in black loading screens. The cosmic horror soaks the city's streets just as it does the interface you play in.

It's explicitly inspired by works by the likes of Junji Ito and HP Lovecraft; you're a young adult drawn into investigating the disturbing things that have been happening around town. Each run has you solving five mysteries (or four if you're playing on an easy mode) out of a current total of 21 possibilities to gain access to the lighthouse that's part of a ritual to summon an elder god.

As you'd expect when contending with unknowable horrors, that's easier said than done. World Of Horror's a run-based roguelike for a reason, as even the easier difficulties can cause you trouble. Though that's all part of the fun. When just about every thing that can possibly go wrong inevitably happens, making it through by the skin of your teeth – which can become unnaturally sharp if you use one of several spells – is exhilarating. You've got to juggle two health bars, your Stamina and Reason (which using things like the aforementioned spell can sap), and these will both be reduced if you fail skill checks in one of nearly 200 events that can occur as you investigate areas, as well as through combat. On top of that, a run-ending Doom meter fills with every action.

And did we mention your limited funds for kitting yourself out or patching up injuries at the hospital, or the town-wide negative effects that occur as the old god draws closer? Oh, and how each god has its own special rule to make your investigation more challenging? One trapped in a mirror, for example, means that Doom shoots up whenever you rest to restore your health.

> When everything goes wrong, making it through by the skin of your teeth is exhilarating.

SUMMONING CIRCLE

Being a bit much is the point, though, which also plays into combat. It's turn-based, and the huge array of options can feel overwhelming at first, though it boils down using your Stamina to balance either blocking or dodging while boosting the hit rate of your own strikes.

Being simpler than it looks is maybe WOH's biggest flaw. As is the case with a lot of roguelikes, you'll find optimal ways to play that can be hard to unstick yourself from – though doing so is encouraged through different starting characters and backstories. Additional events can be unlocked to add some variety, as can run customisation options. But the cosmic-horror-like unpredictability is where it shines. While there are always fresh secrets to stumble upon, it's a shame the unknowable can eventually be anticipated.

Fantastic monochrome style and chilling writing makes this a great horror to spend time with, though it struggles to maintain the mood across lots of runs. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

7 PLAY

Like A Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name

Where the Dragon Of Dojima isn't the Dragon Of Dojima

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £44.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sega
DEV Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 8-30 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitle size, background, and colour options; speaker name colours; colour vision assistance for protanopia, deuteranopia, and tritanopia

The Yakuza series rebrand, announced with much fanfare, was supposed to spell the end of long-time protagonist Kiryu Kazuma. The series took its original Japanese name, Like A Dragon, for all territories, and introduced a turn-based combat style and new protagonist. Yakuza was ready for something different. Or was it? Gaiden proves Kiryu's retirement to be rather short-lived.

There's no-one quite like the Dragon Of Dojima, and so maybe it wasn't the biggest surprise when he popped up in Yakuza: Like A Dragon. But how did he end up there after spectacularly faking his death and renouncing the Yakuza lifestyle at the end of Yakuza 6? Like A Dragon Gaiden ('side story' in Japanese) seeks to answer that question. Only… it doesn't. Not really. Well. Somewhat?

Let's start at the beginning: at the end of Yakuza 6, the Daidoji Clan helps Kiryu successfully fake his death and secure the existence of the Morning Glory orphanage. In exchange, Kiryu has to work for them under a new alias, Joryu. Joryu even fights in the Daidoji style, an all-new fighting style for the series mainly referred to as the catchier Agent style when you select it. This makes Kiryu incredibly quick, even though his attacks are slightly less powerful in exchange. If you enjoy old-school Kiryu, you can use the second fighting

As disguises go, Kiryu's is definitely a bad one. He's not fooling anyone – not us, and not other Yakuza.

> Kiryu risks death for people he's spent a total of five minutes of screen time with.

1 We didn't think RGG studio would let a man of Kiryu's age do capoeira. Check out those moves! 2 Gaiden looks great – some of its Heat actions would've been cinematics in previous games. 3 Combat is as satisfyingly crunchy as always, and the music is amazing this time around.

style, called Yakuza, which is slower all round but literally packs more of a punch.

The most interesting aspect of the Agent fighting style, however, is the gadgetry on offer. (You collect gadgets as the story goes on.) With a long press of one of the attack buttons you can call drones, use a web to lasso enemies, throw a cigarette bomb, or even turn Joryu's shoes into small jets that propel you sharply forward. While these are really just silly little contraptions, they are consistently fun to use, making Gaiden the LAD game with the best iteration of classic, real-time Yakuza combat.

DISGUISED DRAGON

Within minutes of a routine mission for the CIA, Joryu is exposed as Kiryu – it happens so early on, in fact, that if it weren't for the rest of the plot, we'd be convinced Kiryu's new alias is nothing more than a running gag. In Clark Kent/Superman style, the only disguise he uses is a suit and a pair of glasses, and you regularly run into antagonists who are all but begging him to admit he's Kiryu. Eventually the Omi Alliance, which has appeared throughout the series, kidnaps a Daidoji member to get Kiryu to 'fess up, prompting him to chase them.

If it weren't for the rest of the plot, we'd be convinced Kiryu's new alias is a running gag.

There isn't that much more to the story. Kiryu spends most of his time risking death for people he's spent a total of five minutes of screen time with. That in itself isn't unique to Gaiden, but these rescue missions lack the urgency of him getting in trouble for people who he has deep personal history with (even if some of that history happened off-screen or several games ago). It's difficult to care about these random new characters, and while it helps the story that there aren't 50 different patriarchs and clan branches to keep track of, the actual connection to the events of Like A Dragon is an ending sequence that's otherwise completely disconnected from the plot.

For a LAD game, Gaiden's main story is surprisingly short, which makes sense once you know it was originally planned as DLC for the upcoming LAD: Infinite Wealth – this also explains the lack of side-missions. Instead of the ones LAD fans know and love, such as, er, posing as a high school student's boyfriend, or dissolving a cult by beating up all of its members, you complete missions for the Akame Network. You meet Akame herself relatively early on in the story, in Sotenbori. She runs a homeless network – the plot essentially borrows the idea from Like A Dragon that homeless people make perfect spies.

Bar a few that harken back to more in-depth side-stories of old, most of Akame's missions are fetch quests. Homeless people and random inhabitants of Osaka will ask you for anything and everything (alcohol, tissues, food) and upon delivering it, you gain Akame points. You can exchange these for fighting skills and other items, which makes them pretty valuable, but all you need to do is buy one or two of everything in a convenience store and distribute it among the populace. That's your side-missions.

4 Due to the new Agent fighting style, the number of opponents seems to have increased. 5 Gaiden has few new locations, but revisiting Sotenbori is fun. 6 Don't worry, Gaiden is still the kind of game that lets you fight tigers.

Given the way Gaiden makes you engage with its minigames as part of the main story, you get the feeling they are meant to be the main attraction – it's unclear why Kiryu needed to check out the cabaret club that badly, or enter the coliseum, but these are also some of the best distractions Gaiden has to offer. Sure, you can just play on the Master System and in the arcade as usual – Sega has included Alex Kidd In Miracle World and Enduro Racer on the former, and Daytona 2 (retitled Sega Racing Classic) in the latter (the first time it's ever been rereleased).

TAKE ME BACK

Unfortunately, some of the minigames are better at evoking the Like A Dragon spirit than the actual game is. The coliseum lets you play as fan-favourite characters from the series, such as Goro Majima, who are otherwise sorely missing; and in dressing Kiryu up you can inject some of the whimsy back into a game that's otherwise relentlessly dramatic. Gaiden simply doesn't know what to do with Kiryu, even though the fondness fans feel for him is its main selling point.

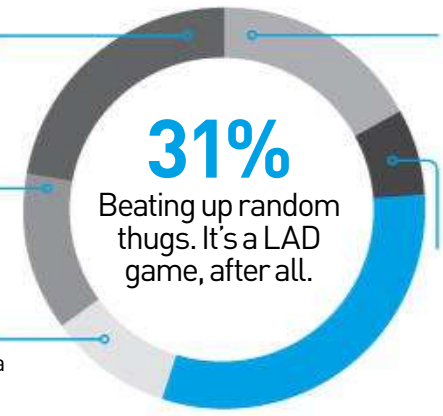
Gaiden isn't a good entry point to the series. (Newcomers should start right at the beginning of either Kiryu or Kasuga's story, as the plot is unfriendly to newcomers otherwise.) Combat is probably more fun in Gaiden than it's ever been, especially if you're not into the turn-based style, but this game inadvertently shows why the series needed refreshing in the first place, and maybe even why Kiryu should've stayed dead.

It's always good to see Kiryu again, but the lack of other recognisable faces and fun side-quests makes this a mere time filler until Infinite Wealth arrives. **Malindy Hetfeld**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: LAD: GAIDEN



22% Engaging in a minigame as part of the main story.

13% Watching Joryu remove his glasses. Things are going down!

10% Using the spider gadget on a group of foes.

17% Distributing the contents of your inventory, from eggs to cigs, to homeless people.

7% Fighting down cravings for Japanese food while you watch Joryu enjoying lunch.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

AKAME
An information broker (and singer) who takes care of the homeless in Osaka.

KIHEI HANAWA
A handler of sorts, he acts as the middleman between Joryu and the Daidoji Clan.

HOMARE NISHITANI III
High in the Omi Alliance and ruler of the Castle.

SECOND OPINION YAKUZA DIE-HARD

Kiryu's back! As is real-time combat! And Sotenbori! But once my fanboying subsides, I'm just left with 'why?' The story lacks weight, and the Agent combat feels pointless next to Yakuza style's powerful hits. It feels more like a Greatest Hits excuse to return to pocket racing, cabaret clubs, the coliseum, and more. But sadly, not much else besides. Roll on, Kasuga's return. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

THE FIRST SIX HOURS

1 Kiryu is living as Joryu, an agent for the Daidoji Clan. He stops his handler Hanawa from being kidnapped – this time. 2 Hanawa's kidnapper Tsuruno, head of the Watase Family in Osaka, introduces himself and tries to get Joryu to admit he's Kiryu. 3 Kiryu wins a coliseum fight in order to find out where Hanawa is being held.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES
Gaiden's modern setting suits Kiryu better than Ishin's historical one, and the stakes are higher.

NO
While Kiryu has grown on us more than Kasuga, Gaiden lacks some of the humour that LAD has.

YES
Now that Kiryu has learned the fun Agent fighting style, he's taken Judgment's main selling point.

There are three love interests for Elise to pursue throughout the week: Lebkuchen, Freya, and Rozenmarine.

Little Goody Two Shoes

Finding evil by moonlight, winning games by daylight

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £14.99
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV AstralShift
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable text speed and effects intensity; extended volume controls

Many games list retro-inspired visuals as part of their appeal, but Little Goody Two Shoes genuinely nails '90s anime charm, with a dash of old-school Disney mixed in for good measure. That doesn't just apply to the character art and frequent fully-drawn scenes (CGs); even the pixel sprites and menus take a 'more is more' approach, with plants and fruit twisting around intricate frame borders. It's a pleasure to take in the details, even when things aren't going your way in-game.

On top of having a strong sense of style, it toes the line between being properly creepy and shamelessly adorable. By day you mingle with townsfolk and do chores; at night you venture into the woods and prepare for a dark ritual that'll make your heart's deepest desire come true (which means avoiding perilous ghosties and solving taxing puzzles).

TIME IS MONEY

During a playthrough's week of escapades, you need to keep an eye on your stock of items, plus your health, stamina, and sanity bars. How easy it is to keep everything filled depends on how thoroughly you explore during the Witching Hour every night and how much you can afford to stock up based on your fervour (and success) at your maid-of-all-work duties during the day. There are only so many hours in a day and only so many coins in your pocket. You will have to choose between courting pretty girls and getting paid. Every day. [*So much for escapism* – ed]

While more relaxed, the daytime features minigames involving collecting eggs, chopping wood, and so on for people around town. They're even amassed in their own little arcade cabinet screen.

Despite her unabashed materialism, protagonist Elise is charming, and you can root for her even when she's not necessarily on the side of right, which makes playing both sides all the more interesting. On the one hand you're a hardworking, church-going citizen of Kieferberg, and on the other you're harbouring a stranger who knows way too much about witchcraft and then lying through your teeth about it. Just like your item management, this is a careful balancing act. You want the townsfolk to like you, not only because they fund your many trips to the bakery but because otherwise they might burn you at the stake.

> **By day you mingle with townsfolk and do chores; at night you prepare for a dark ritual.**

Though this is a prequel to Pocket Mirror, which is currently not available on PlayStation, Little Goody Two Shoes works perfectly fine as a standalone, quirky puzzler. Fairly snappy, there are ten endings up for grabs depending on the girl you romance and your dedication to the ominous Him, making a replay as tantalising as a black magic wish-fulfilment ritual.

Little Goody Two Shoes is a colourful gift of genuine uneasiness tied up with a bow and laid out as a tasty and fully worthy ritual offering to nostalgia. **Max Williams**

7
PLAY

The dust hangs in the air for so long, sometimes you'll drive past your own trail.

EA Sports WRC

A new Dirt Rally, but officially licensed? Take our money!

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £44.99
ETA Out now
PUB Electronic Arts
DEV Codemasters
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 6 hrs per season
ACCESSIBILITY Colour blind filters; subtitles (adjustable size); mono mix

Codemasters bought the WRC licence, EA bought Codemasters… and you? You have to buy this game. EA Sports WRC is the most convincing rally sim ever made, combining superlative driving physics with gorgeous visuals and a deep career mode. But best of all? It's fun. Proper, vintage racing game fun that oozes from every turn. If you grew up loving Colin McRae Rally, your dream game is here.

Your career can begin in WRC's junior category, the mid-tier WRC2, or you get stuck straight in with the WRC monsters. You can build a rally car yourself, choosing components while watching your budget level, or just buy a stock vehicle. It's all straightforward and easy to get started.

Seasons are split into weeks, each allowing a single card to be completed, be that scouting for new engineers, resting your personnel, buying a garage slot or competing in an event. Some rallies are invitationals with loaned cars, where you risk incurring hundreds of thousands of credits in repair fees, while others benefit your relationship with your benefactor (which essentially boils down to a single bar that fills up or empties depending on how your actions please or displease your sponsor). Avoiding overly complex micromanagement, the game instead rewards good driving and simple budget planning as you build your team.

EASY RIGHT

Do well enough and you'll win bigger budgets or even step up into the next category. On medium event length each season takes about six hours (and they fly by), with most stages taking around seven minutes to complete. As a result, EA Sports WRC manages to appease hardcore rally fans while still providing a quick and accessible structure for casuals. You've still got to *want* to play a rally game, of course – the driving here is very challenging and constantly falling off the road isn't for everyone, but that said, it seems easier to control than Dirt Rally 2.0, with far fewer early excursions into agricultural territory. Competitors' times are a touch unbalanced between surfaces, but it rarely feels unfair.

Visually, it's mostly superb, with varied, vast environments and incredible foliage density, though the weather effects could be better, as could the colours, which aren't quite photorealistic. Unlike the solid Dirt Rally 2.0, there are some frame hitches and screen tearing in busy scenes, and there isn't a performance graphics setting to prioritise frame rate, though reducing FOV appears to help.

> **Combines superlative driving physics with gorgeous visuals and a deep career mode.**

Still, a rally game lives or dies by its corner-by-corner driving, and this is the most convincing around. From low-speed wheelspin to glorious drifts over snow, it's glorious. A rally fan's dream come true.

EA Sports WRC is simply the finest example of the genre. A few hitches and bugs can't detract from a deep, breathless and wholly fun experience. Easy, right? **Justin Towell**

9 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PSVR2 [rev], PSVR **PRICE** £11.99 **ETA** Out now **PUB** TinyBuild **DEV** Casey Donnelan Games **PLAYERS** 1

Kill It With Fire VR

Don't get burned

Compared to zombies or hellspawn, some folk find spiders more terrifying, so an FPS that has you trying to eradicate the eight-legged freaks sounds like a great idea, and compared to the previous PS4 version, VR feels like a perfect fit. Across nine levels, which take you from the living room to the local convenience store to the office, your mission is to seek out the arachnids hiding among the objects and furniture,[1] and then squish, smash, shoot, or indeed burn them out of existence.

Your phobias aside, they're not exactly a challenge to kill, though you might run into slightly tougher subspecies, such as one that shoots webs to stick your hands in place for a few seconds. But the fun comes from the escalating disproportionate force you use to eliminate them, wielding everything from conventional firearms to lightsabers to a good old-fashioned frying pan, and the destruction you leave in your wake.

We just wish it was better implemented in VR as using the UI to swap between the many different weapons you acquire is quite a faff, as is simply trying to pass a weapon between hands. The hand tracking also feels inconsistent – sometimes it lets us grav-pick an object a few feet away, yet at others it struggles to register a basic handle to open a cupboard or drawer.[2]

The VR game's as short-lived as the PS4 version, while the optional objectives that pad out a level rarely have anything to do with killing spiders, though completing them does earn you upgrades to make mass arachnicide easier. If you've killed them with fire once already, however, the promise of doing it again in virtual reality isn't quite so tantalising. **Alan Wen**

6 PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 Their skittering sound alone is enough to unnerve you. **2** A pre-launch bug that repeatedly crashes the game at the title screen hardly helps.

INFO **FORMAT** PSVR2 **PRICE** £24.99 **ETA** Out now **PUB** Fast Travel Games **DEV** Fast Travel Games **PLAYERS** 1

Vampire: The Masquerade – Justice

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Fighting vampires is okay, we *guess*, but being one is where the fun is really at, especially in VR. Clearly made with love for the World Of Darkness source material, this is one of the most pleasant surprises of the year – with a few caveats.

Although there's a skill tree that allows you to unlock and upgrade abilities, you start off pleasingly powerful, with the ability to teleport short distances and an instakill leap attack. Your fists can send puny mortals flying (although this is a last resort). One of the best bits is feeding. Grab your prey, lean your head in, and enjoy your numnums for a triple threat of minor Hunger (increased each time you use a power) satiation, slight health regeneration, and a kill.

There's a touch of Dishonored here, in that teleportation is coupled with being encouraged to remain unseen and stick to elevated positions wherever possible. It's disappointing to see VR gameplay tropes being deployed,[1] but in general Justice does an excellent job of making you feel like a strong yet fragile supernatural being.

Justice's greatest problems lie at a technical level. It doesn't fall down often, but when it does, it falls *hard*.[2] Power through these issues and you'll find a bloody good vampire adventure. The ending hints at a sequel; we hope it gets made. Justice is bat to the bone. **Luke Kemp**

7 PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 There's more climbing of drainpipes than you might expect of a vampire. **2** What is it with World Of Darkness games and technical issues? It's a curse developers can't break. The odd glitching enemy is more amusing than anything, but it's hard to laugh when we have to restart a mission due to respawning half a mile above the map.

INFO **FORMAT** PSVR2 **PRICE** £28.99 **ETA** Out now **PUB** Sony Pictures Virtual Reality **DEV** NDreams **PLAYERS** 1-4

Ghostbusters: Rise Of The Ghost Lord

Ain't afraid of no hosts

With a PKE meter on one hip, ghost trap on the other, and your proton wand slung over your back, you're equipped just like a Ghostbuster should be. In this VR co-op shooter you work for the new, younger San Francisco division, where you're tasked with cleaning up the Bay Area's ghost problem. The big one, of course, is the Ghost Lord himself, who you unwittingly release in the prologue mission when you're first collecting your gear. Oops.

The mechanics of ghostbusting feel solid, as you shoot streams out from your proton wand first to take out a ghost's shield (a blue gauge on their right), then to hammer down their energy (an orange gauge on their left). Pulling back the wand feels almost like a fishing game,[1] as you weaken these spooks and then fire out a trap underneath them.

The problem is that these mechanics don't evolve. You spend your income on upgrading gear to become more efficient, but it's not like you have other weapons or classes to customise your playstyle. Maps nicely depict different sides of the Golden City. And you've different modes to rotate between – the time-based On The Clock is pretty basic, though Exorcism and Giga Trap Reversal are more involved. They're also a drag or nigh-on impossible to complete without a team, even if solo players do have a literal ghost companion to help out. As this is a live service game with more DLC and modes promised, whether you're compelled to continue cycling through these missions long after you've defeated Ghost Lord[2] will be down to whether you have pals ready and willing to bust alongside you. **Alan Wen**

6 PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 Press ◎/Ⓡ to fire an extra-damaging burst of energy. **2** Being matched with an endgame player risks you being thrown into the final mission.

Combat is slow and a little clumsy, but the Jedi mind tricks are fun.

Journey To Foundation

The sums add up

INFO

FORMAT PSVR2
PRICE £29.99
ETA Out now
PUB Skydance Interactive
DEV Archiact
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 6-8 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Comfort settings; left or right-handed; subtitles; skip height gameplay

Asimov's classic series of Foundation novels has a narrative spanning centuries, represents the hardest of hard science fiction, and has influenced everything from Dune to Star Wars to real-world economics and, well… Elon Musk. And after all that, it's now a PSVR game.

On paper it reads like Journey To Foundation shouldn't work; the source material is just too dense. But developer Archiact has been cute in its approach by using Asimov's world to set up its own story *behind* the events of the books. As a spy within the Galactic Empire you must infiltrate a group supporting The Foundation – a disruptive bunch of hippies who pray to a God-mathematician on the edge of the galaxy – and take them out. Or will you?

GOOD FOUNDATIONS

This is an immersive RPG in which narrative choice *really* matters; how you respond to the characters you meet in turn affects how they see you and how the story evolves. The game uses VR to bring this to life in subtle ways – you make choices using eye tracking, and likewise uncover clues and narrative leads by *looking* around the environments. There's a clever use of gesture too; each of the game's factions has its own salute, and by repeating the right one to faction members you gain their trust. There's a great moment early on when you're told to put your hands up – fail to respond and you're shot.

Immersion is key to VR and Journey To Foundation gets much right, including good use of scale when climbing and abseiling down cliffs and burning elevator shafts (you can skip these if you hate heights). You manually upgrade your weapons by swapping out chips, and pull your lock pick and blowtorch from your suit – the latter burns satisfyingly through grates to unlock additional routes. There's also a Jedi-like gesture used to blow and read minds, revealing codes and extra dialogue choices or, during combat, sizzling enemies' brains.

> **There's a great moment when you're told to put your hands up – fail to respond and you're shot.**

The down side is that the immersion can occasionally be broken by bugs and some flaky VR-isms – for example, you need to physically pick up keycards and gun upgrades, but drop them and they vanish or disappear into the scenery and it's time to restart. Using 2D backdrops in some areas to try to convince you of the scale doesn't really work, either. The weapons can feel a little inaccurate and generally the action disappoints.

But Journey To Foundation has some genuinely original uses of VR and gesture and a story you always feel invested in, and because of its branching narrative you'll want to replay as soon as the credits roll.

While admittedly a little buggy in places, this is a clever use of Isaac Asimov's genre-leading science fiction, with enough invention and immersivity to impress. **Ian Dean**

7 PLAY

Persona 5 Tactica

The Phantom Thieves exchange covert ops for... tactical warfare?

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £54.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sega
DEV P5 Team, Atlus
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 40-70 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Attack range, firing direction indicator, and camera shake toggles; adjustable camera sensitivity

Played Persona 5 Strikers? Then the beginning of Persona 5 Tactica will feel like déjà vu: the Phantom Thieves come together at Café Leblanc at the end of the school year to spend a last afternoon together. However, for reasons unknown they're suddenly transported to a different dimension, where a group of brave rebels needs their help.

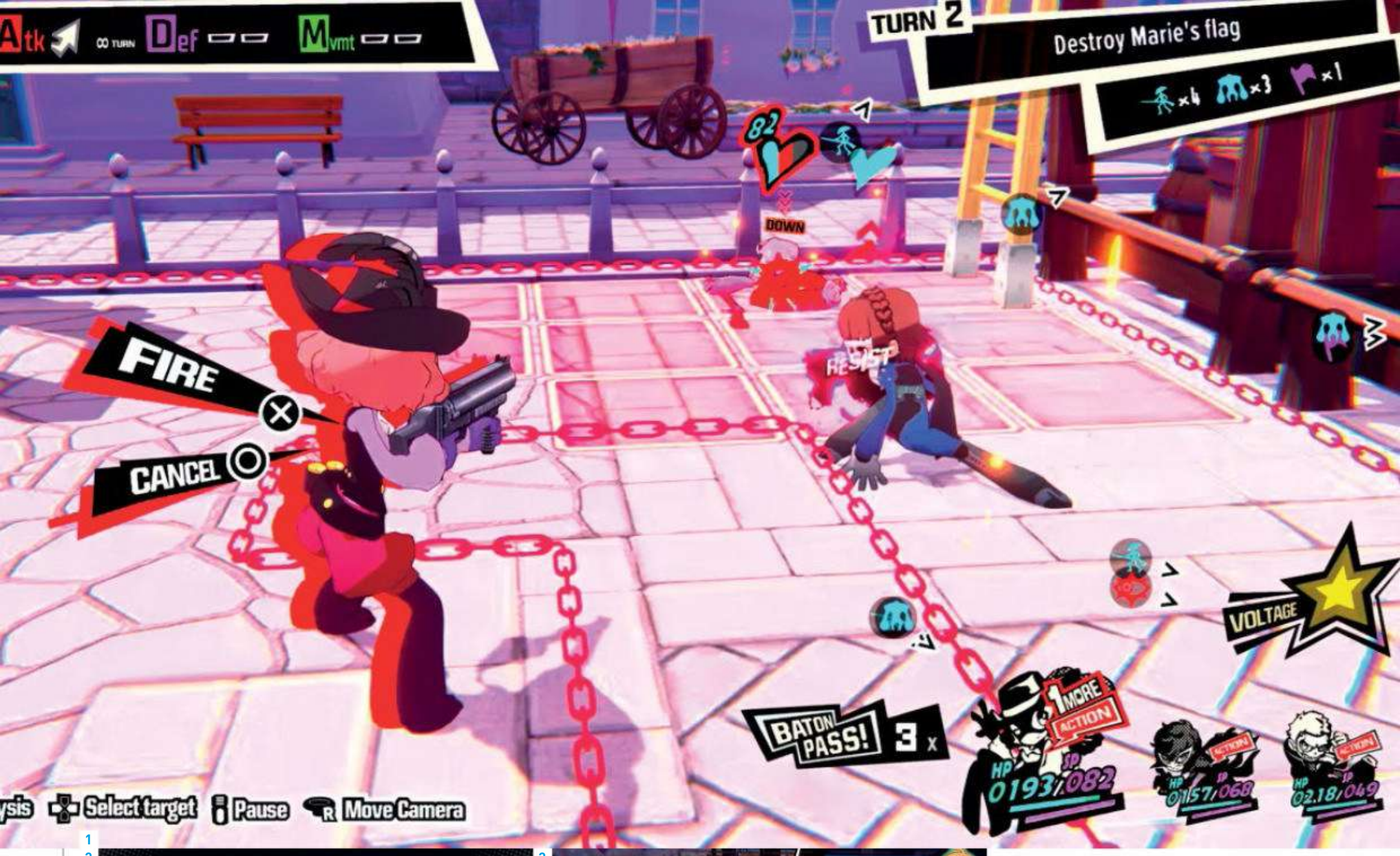
It's been six years since the main game's first iteration, and, counting Persona 5 Royal, we have by now reached the fourth game featuring the Phantom Thieves. Whether it's because we're getting impatient for any and all Persona 6 news or because it features radically different activity, Tactica can feel like the odd one out, as nice as it is to see the gang again. This feeling is exacerbated by the setting – this new dimension, a realm ruled over by the tyrannical Marie, isn't really a palace, nor is it really the metaverse either, and none of it really matters. Marie is a stereotypically evil villain with a 'Ho ho ho' laugh to match, and that's why you fight her.

TACTICAL MAGIC

This time around the fighting takes the shape of turn-based tactical combat, reminiscent of that in games such as Final Fantasy Tactics and XCOM. Each level is made up of a number of structures that you and your opponents can use for cover, as well as some climbable platforms. At the beginning of a round the enemies, all of them soldiers in Marie's army, are hunkered down behind cover, which makes them resistant to damage. In order to fight them effectively, you

The Phantom Thieves take on a new, adorable, chibi form for this game.

> Tactica might sound daunting, but it is a game designed for newcomers to the genre.



1 For the first few hours, switching between weapons constantly in order to do maximum damage is fun.
2 Chief antagonist Marie might be evil, but she does know how to put on a good show, which we appreciate.
3 Constant encouragement from Oracle and some neat effects make you feel like a winner.

have to literally knock them out of their cover, which you can do either by using a Persona attack or by taking a risk and standing right next to them for a melee attack.

Once an enemy is out of cover, they're defenceless until the next round, which is where the Thieves' ranged weapons come in. Shooting a defenceless enemy results in them taking more damage and grants a character an extra turn, during which you can attack again or use a Persona skill such as healing or raising your attack. As long as you haven't performed an action yet, you're able to move your team members around as often as you want, so finding the right position and combination of attacks to down as many enemies as possible is key.

P5 TEDIOUSNESS

If you're new to tactics games combat might sound daunting, and the wave of tutorial text Tactica tries to drown you in certainly doesn't help, but this is a game designed for newcomers to the genre, and thus very forgiving in its difficulty – to the point of becoming too easy. Most missions simply ask you to defeat every enemy on the map. To gain more money for equipment and skill points for perks such as stronger attacks and more hit points you can fulfil additional challenges, such as finishing a mission in a certain number of turns.

There just isn't enough mission variety for a game of this (considerable) length.

On top of that, optional side-missions take that concept and make it even more difficult – for example, by asking you to defeat every enemy on a map within one turn. Without these challenges, Tactica would genuinely run the risk of becoming boring; the level design is uninspired, and there just isn't enough mission variety for a game of this (considerable) length.

Unlike in the original Persona 5, enemies here don't have elemental weaknesses, so you can use your Persona any way you please. Additionally, Joker isn't the only one who can use multiple Persona – each team member can equip an additional summon. This is nice in theory, but in practice it means there is hardly any reason to use the rest of your Thieves once you've alighted on a good team to use, since all of them can now employ the same skills. There is really no need to keep filling your catalogue with new Persona, given that many of them share the same attacks. Equipping a new Persona is mostly an exercise in testing how big their attack ranges are: some attacks can hit multiple enemies, or hit more distant ones, and there is no good way to find out what works aside from trial and error.

For a game that gives you so many genuinely satisfying ways to gain the upper hand on enemies, Tactica is astoundingly unintuitive. You'll probably keep testing a character's movement range or looking up an enemy's attack range after you've done the same thing a hundred times already – we never feel as though we've grown better at telling what the best tactic would be, which is both a blessing and a curse. After all,

4 Erina has no Persona, but she does possess an unbreakable spirit. 5 It will always feel cool to sweep away several foes with one well-placed attack. 6 The boss battles provide a fun twist on tactics gameplay, but they're also very long.

you don't want to keep doing the same things over and over, but the consequences for a bad decision in Tactica are so mild that you might as well not worry about tactics too much at all.

P5 FOREVER?

Tactica deserves praise for translating all the classic elements of Persona 5 to a tactics game. The new chibi character style is vibrant and fun, and the user interfaces are as stylish as ever. All attacks, be they special attacks or just weapon attacks, have a great sense of impact – it's immensely satisfying to send enemies flying, each and every time. The Phantom Thieves' banter has always been a key selling point of P5 in any iteration, and simply seeing these characters together again is a pleasure. These characters are beloved for a reason, and Tactica is another game to get them just right.

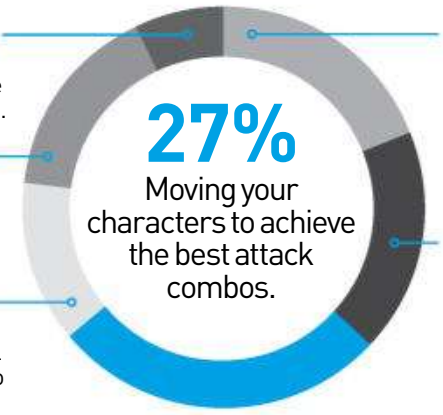
Still, Tactica is the weakest Persona 5 spin-off yet because it can't deliver on its story and the tactical gameplay quickly loses its novelty, and the same goes for its static setting. Villains feel one-dimensional as well, simply being evil for the sake of it – whereas giving them depth is something Persona's devs usually excel at. In trying to be something for everyone, Tactica is too easy for tactics veterans and probably too long for anyone else, lacking the variety that would justify the hours you need to put in. If Persona 5 has taught us anything, it's that you only put up with repetitive action if the story is good enough, and here it isn't.

Tactica lovingly translates Persona 5 to another format, but once you grasp the basic activity, the lack of variety both in action and story make it drag. Malindy Hetfeld

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: PERSONA 5 TACTICA



7% Making new Persona after every battle to use them exactly once.

16% Switching team members because you feel guilty for not using them.

13% Listening to the Phantom Thieves' delightful banter to earn two skill points.

19% Moving your characters around to achieve a Triple Threat attack.

18% Checking movement and attack ranges to achieve the best possible attack combos.

HOW TO... DO A TRIPLE THREAT ATTACK

Triple Threats can turn the tide of battle. Position your teammates in a triangle around an enemy without cover – a rough triangle of blue lines appears when they're in position. Now move the trio around until the triangle catches fire and the Triple Threat command appears.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

ERINA
The leader of the rebel corps is the only one capable of reversing Marie's mind control.

TOSHIO
This young politician is connected to Marie, who kidnapped him from the real world.

LADY MARIE
The first villain. Marie has subjugated the populace with mind control magic.

SECOND OPINION WOEFUL TACTICIAN

The XCOM-like free movement and ever-stylish Persona wrapper make Tactica surprisingly easy to engage with for an SRPG novice like me, but it's let down by a dull structure that drags. Compared to the lavish adventure in Persona 5 Strikers, which felt like a spin-off sequel from the main game, Tactica ends up feeling like a spin-off snoozer by game's end. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Witness a fusion accident and at least you get a bronze trophy for your pain.

SILVER
Keep going – you'll get this trophy once you've traversed 10,000 squares.

GOLD
Watch all hideout talk conversations. Do you need a reason to hang out with the Thieves?

The new bike is mega-fast and exciting, letting you ride up walls and shoot things. Boom!

Ghostrunner 2

Die, die, and die again

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB 505 Games
DEV One More Level
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 14 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; 'combat assist' low/high

Our death toll sitting at 180 for one level isn't normal. Indeed, dying over 100 times is normally a sign that a game is too hard. But not in the case of Ghostrunner 2, which doesn't punish your failures, instead teaching you to perfect your movement through trial and error until you're essentially speedrunning each section in a flurry of wall-running and dismembered limbs. Did it in 181 tries? You're a legend.

It's one of the most intense experiences on PS5. Every second in combat is an array of threats and traversal possibilities. Bullets and energy waves come at you from all sides – and everything will kill you in a single hit. Movement can feel clumsy as you attempt to become death rather than dead. Melee attacks feel messy, all missed swipes and frantic strafing. Fortunately, restart points are liberal, even breaking boss fights up into segments, which helps prevent frustration.

GHOST RIDER

We could have said much of that about the original, but the sequel changes direction halfway through with awesome new bike sections. Super-fast and action-packed, they show off the commendable game engine as you head out into the wasteland. As in the on-foot sections, visibility and signposting aren't always perfect, but the action is just as intense – and now at 250kph.

While upgrading your abilities via a more conventional skill tree (the last game's Tetris blocks have gone) does make it slightly easier, Ghostrunner 2 always demands precision and dexterity, especially in the rail-grinding sequences. Switching off turbines while side-stepping laser beams in mid-air is far from easy, and if you find it tricky to make Sonic The Hedgehog jump on an item box, this game simply isn't for you. It's ultra-hardcore gaming and you constantly need to use your brain and so many digits.

> If you find it tricky to make Sonic The Hedgehog jump on an item box, this game isn't for you.

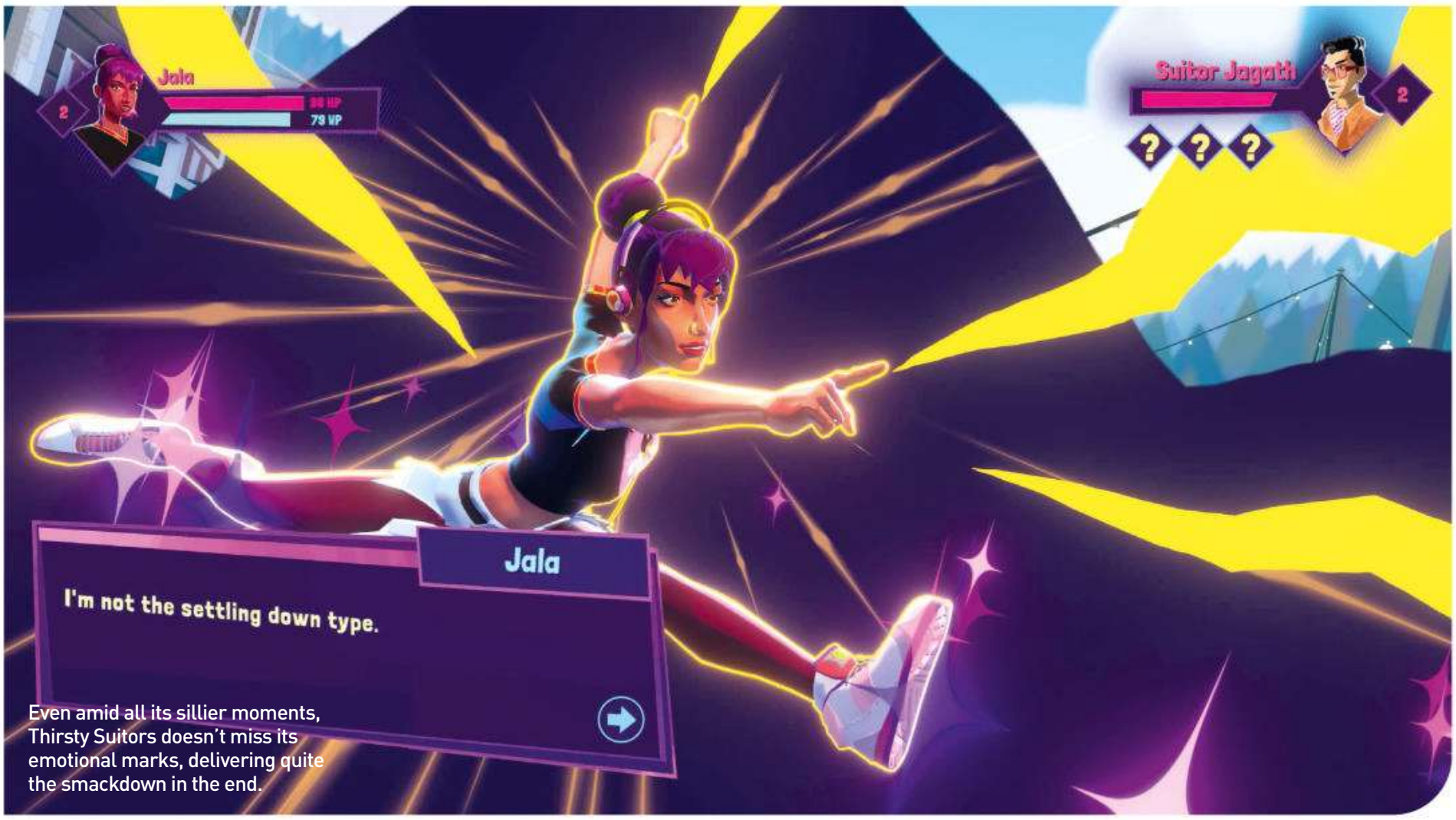
The default gore level is high, with some pretty nasty deaths, slice physics, and pulsing neck stumps. You can turn it off in the settings menu, but even so, there's very little that's 'nice' about this game, with frequent bad language and a general (deliberate) feeling of desolation.

The 14 gruelling hours of main story are complemented by a VR-style minigame, and there are optional time-based challenges along the way, plus a multiplier-based scoring system to encourage repeat play. Most enemies are recycled from the original, though there are a few brilliantly grotesque new ones. The story's solid too, though you might not feel much attachment to the characters.

It's an accomplished, stylish and often brilliant sequel, but so grim and arduous, you may find you don't actually *like* it.

At once stylish, clever, frustrating, and messy, Ghostrunner 2 isn't simple to enjoy or recommend. But there's no denying the quality of the design. **Justin Towell**

7 PLAY



Even amid all its sillier moments, Thirsty Suitors doesn't miss its emotional marks, delivering quite the smackdown in the end.

Thirsty Suitors

RPG fan? Consider yourself quenched

INFO

FORMAT PS5, PS4
PRICE £29.99
ETA Out now
PUB Annapurna Interactive
DEV Outerloop Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 8+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable dialogue text speed/text auto-advance; non-adjustable subtitles for voiced dialogue; auto-complete options for rapid press, circle, tap, and hold QTE prompts, and skate challenges; three dificulty settings; infinite continues; motion blur and controller vibration on/off

No-one has left Timber Hills (a colourful vision of an otherwise dying town in America's Pacific Northwest) quite like Jala Jayaratne. After a tumultuous on-off relationship with her soulmate, Tyler, Jala leaves town with another woman – ten years older and the mayor's daughter to boot – without so much as a text. Now Jala's back, and all of her youthful mistakes have also come home to roost.

With her exes lining up to give a piece of their mind, what follows is decidedly reminiscent of Scott Pilgrim. However, rather than finding herself at the mercy of someone else's narrative à la Ramona Flowers, Jala will rescue herself and the relationships she holds dear. In between not-so-evil exes, Jala wrestles with the expectations of her Desi upbringing, often literally as her Paati keeps sending waves of misters hoping to wife her up. Compared to her exes, these guys (and girls) are pushovers, but they're essential to teaching you the ins and outs of the combat system before you trade sharply written, air-clearing barbs with all of Timber Hills' broken hearts.

GRANNY'S GOT HANDS

Everyone you fight is weak for Jala in some way, and taunts push them over the edge. It's a neat turn-based combat system that hinges on status ailments, finding fresh framing for an all-too-easily neglected mainstay mechanic. For instance Sergio, Jala's primary school boyfriend, never did move on and his cute crush has developed into full-blown thirst. Mashing ◎ to bat your lashes sees him dissolve into a sweaty mess, leaving him open to extra damage via targeted skills like Suitor Slam, a psychic blast of 'DOWN, BOY' straight to the face.

QTEs are not only essential for doling out damage or ensuring Jala doesn't fall for enemy taunts herself – in addition to fighting, you can hone your button presses by patting the local diner's good dog Machan, grinding through skate challenges, and preparing family recipes featuring devastating revelations dropped somewhere between washing hands and washing rice.

Thanks to this RPG's bite-size length, the QTE-heavy gameplay doesn't outstay its welcome, instead contributing to the game's exceedingly extra personality, along with the arch and acrobatic animation and psychic battles. Focussing less on how things really were and more on how they *felt* allows the emotional beats to hit all the harder when they're unleashed thick and fast. Outerloop Games manages to balance the over-the-top tone with a compassionate story about extending grace and making amends for teenage muck-ups. With such a big heart, how could we say no to this?

> **The QTE-heavy gameplay contributes to the game's exceedingly extra personality.**

A bite-sized RPG with a twist on turn-based combat, worth the emotional damage. Smartly written and with a winning personality, this one's a genuine charmer. **Jess Kinghorn**

9 PLAY

Like in the games ISAT is inspired by, battles are only lightly animated.

In Stars And Time

Stars, is that the time already?

Should you feel anything like we do, you'd probably appreciate a good time loop by now – with all the games and books to enjoy and magazines to make, there just aren't enough hours in a day to fit it all in. Unfortunately, the loop In Stars And Time features requires death, and it's altogether more serious than dying for a good book.

The world is going to end tomorrow. Well, it is if you die. After a long and arduous journey (which you do not play through), Siffrin and his adventuring party – including Mirabelle, the Chosen One – are about to enter the final castle and challenge the King, a malevolent entity who has frozen most of the world in time. Defeating him will break the curse, and now it's the final thing your party needs to do. However, Siffrin gets squashed by a boulder and dies in the very first corridor. Classic mistake. Shortly after, however, he wakes up, realising he's caught in a time loop.

DIE AGAIN?

In Stars And Time is a 2D adventure told completely in black and white, made by solo developer Adrienne Bazir under the pseudonym Insertdisc5. Bazir's main idea was to take a more emotional look at the concept of time loops, since few stories focus on how experiencing things repeatedly makes the characters *feel*.

INFO

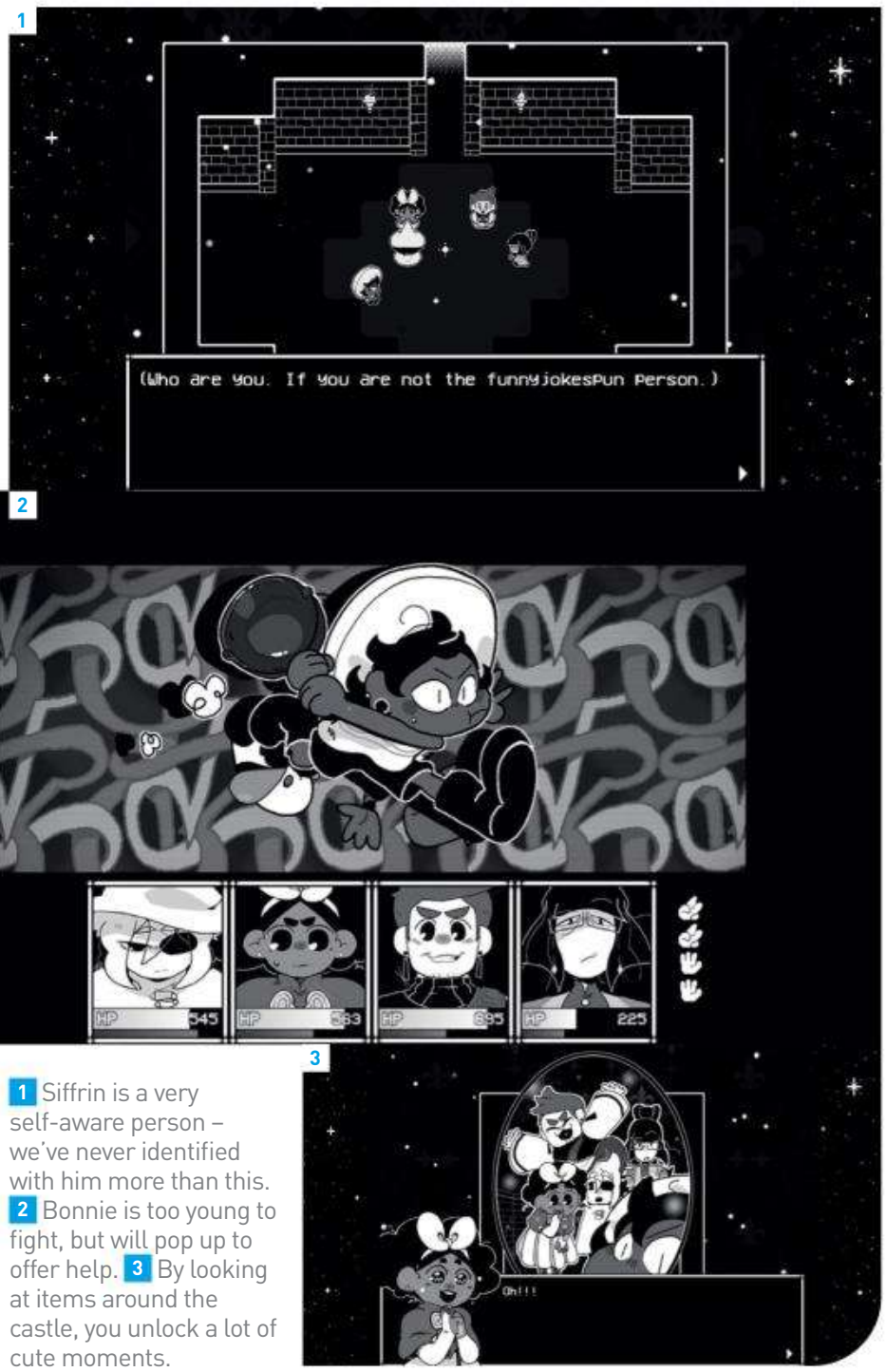
FORMAT PS5
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Armor Games Studios
DEV Insertdisc5
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10 hrs approx.
ACCESSIBILITY Screen shake and text animation toggles

Your goal is rather simple: to get to the highest floor of a castle full of enemies, called sadnesses, and defeat the King. Battles are turn-based. Rather than giving characters and monsters the usual elemental weaknesses, each of them is a rock, paper, or scissors type. You can often guess what type a sadness is simply by looking at them – stone types often ball their fists, scissor types might throw a cheeky peace sign. Combat is decently challenging because health items are rare and every skill has a cooldown period. We never die in battle during our time with the game, but you need to use your skills cleverly, especially the ability to give a turn to another party member, to exploit enemy weaknesses and not be hit too hard yourself.

TO DIE FOR

The biggest hurdle in In Stars And Time isn't monsters, however, it's locked doors. You will inevitably search as much of the castle as you have access to just to find keys, and this, more than anything else, will lead to Siffrin's (often voluntary) demise. When we envisioned the reasons our protagonist would have to heroically face death, we didn't think it would be 'shoot, the key for this door is in a drawer on the second floor, but we are on the third floor and can't go back.' Situations like this don't exactly help to produce an emotional time loop story.

> In Stars And Time tries to keep the frustration looping can cause to a minimum.



1 Siffrin is a very self-aware person – we've never identified with him more than this. 2 Bonnie is too young to fight, but will pop up to offer help. 3 By looking at items around the castle, you unlock a lot of cute moments.

We also don't loop very often – maybe we're just naturally gifted at time-loop gaming, but we loop when the game doesn't allow us to progress otherwise, and that's frustrating rather than interesting. ISAT tries to keep the frustration looping can cause to a minimum. Siffrin retains his experience and skills even if he dies, you keep equipment, and you can equip memories of skills your party members may otherwise have lost. But the game doesn't support autosaving, and the only save points are at the beginning and end of a floor. This means that with each loop you end up backtracking through at least one floor, and since the level design is simple and enemies respawn immediately, even just a few loops feel like work.

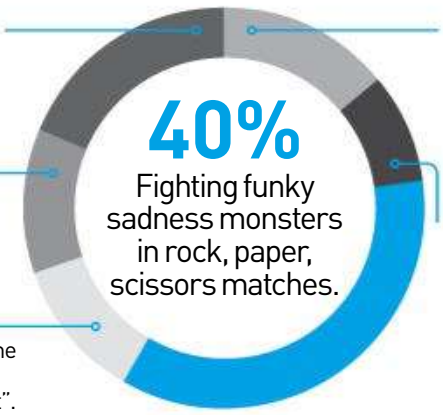
In Stars And Time fails to make the time-looping concept interesting from a gameplay perspective, but its writing and characters make up for a lot of that. We keep playing just because we want to spend more time with this motley crew of adventurers, including kind-hearted himbo Isabeau and Bonnie, snack time expert. The character design is endearing, and the love the team members have for each other is so palpable it feels almost unfair you're meeting them on their final quest. There's also a lot of worldbuilding packed into each conversation, and we happily trail along just because we want to see find out more – despite the other shortcomings.

An interesting premise meets outstandingly written characters, but the gameplay is lacking. Might have made a better visual novel than a dungeon crawler. Malindy Hetfeld

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: IN STARS AND TIME



21% Looking for keys because the bad guy locked all doors behind him.

13% Killing yourself in a benign but daft manner to start a time loop.

13% Skipping dialogue after a time loop, described as Siffrin "spacing out".

16% Listening to Siffrin come up with the worst puns known to mankind.

10% Wondering what tasty treats Bonnie will serve for snack time during camp.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

MIRABELLE
Unaffected by the King's time-freezing curse, Mirabelle has to defeat him.

LOOP
A star who helps you get to grips with your strange time-looping ability.

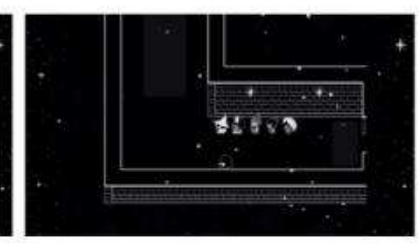
THE KING
Took self-optimisation so far that he learned to use his magic to manipulate time.

HOW TO... UNLEASH A GROUP ATTACK

Group attacks both do a lot of damage and heal your party. If you use five attacks of the same type in a row, you get a free turn with a group attack, like an all-out attack in the Persona games. To achieve that, you will have to give away some turns and potentially even pause attacking.

LOVING/HATING

CRACKING CHARACTERS
The character art and text animations are super-cute. You can tell a lot about someone just by looking at them.



OVERABUNDANT ACTION
While combat only starts as soon as you touch enemies, if you sneak past them they will follow you, at high speed, for entire hallways.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Snack on some pineapple slices. Tasty! Though is it really your *best* idea?

SILVER
Hang out with everyone – they're lovely! – and get to the end, thrice.

GOLD
Remember to get, well, every memory you can. You've got to fill that noggin up.

Swinging across large chasms is exciting, but it can be difficult to find your destination.

Jusant

Please don't try this at home

When we meet our nameless, silent protagonist, he's already hard at work climbing the Tower, a giant structure reaching straight up into the sky. Unlike the mythical Tower of Babel, however, this tower isn't entirely an expression of humanity's hubris – it's also its last chance at survival in a slowly dying, slowly drying world where rain is nothing but a memory.

This is the world post-Jusant, the word meaning 'a receding wave'. Simply put, it's the world after the water went away. Your task is clear from the moment you take control: just climb. The mechanic is easy enough to understand and will feel vaguely familiar if you've ever played another game with lots of climbing, such as Uncharted or Assassin's Creed. The main difference between those two games and this one is that here you control two separate limbs, as well as your trusty climbing rope and a set of pitons, which you can use to secure yourself on long climbs and act like an in-game set of checkpoints.

The right trigger controls our climbing protagonist's right hand and foot, the left trigger, obviously, controls their limbs on the left. In order to climb you have to alternate between the two so that at least one hand is holding onto a ledge at all times. Additionally, you use the left analogue stick to point your hand in the direction you want to climb in. If there is something you're able to hold on to, our hero will extend their hand and reach for it to indicate that it's safe. Controlling individual limbs like this takes some getting used to, and it's not always a smooth climb, but to be this involved gives you a really strong sense of climbing – not unlike the climbing in Death Stranding, an otherwise radically different game.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £19.99
ETA Out now
PUB Don't Nod
DEV Don't Nod
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Different text sizes; screen shake, camera lag, and hint toggles

CLIFF HANGER

Jusant deftly avoids the frustration that Hideo Kojima's hiking sim elicits simply because your little climber can neither lose all his stuff nor fall to his death. Instead, he knows proper climbing etiquette and only climbs after the rope is securely attached at a rope connection point. Even the stamina meter is very forgiving. You can connect your rope to most surfaces, but where other games have climbable surfaces marked crudely with paint, here these points are a handy way to show you're on the right track. You don't only climb upwards, of course. Jusant's environment design is nothing short of a marvel, in that you have a palpable sense of going up – swinging across huge chasms, sometimes hanging off a ceiling completely vertically – while also going inside the mountain, through its tunnels, and around its different faces. Each area of the mountain presents particular challenges, such as harsh weather conditions or

> **Provides direction without being too obvious and rewards climbing with beautiful vistas.**

1 Across all environs, Jusant's flora and fauna can help you on your climb. **2** Your small friend, called a ballast, is a cute animal made of water. **3** The humans may have left, but that doesn't mean the mountain is deserted.

some good old disappearing platforms. Just like the different environments, which become steadily more beautiful as the game progresses, the different areas provide subtle variety in the climbing experience that otherwise remains similar throughout once you've learned to use all your tools.

PEAK ENTERTAINMENT

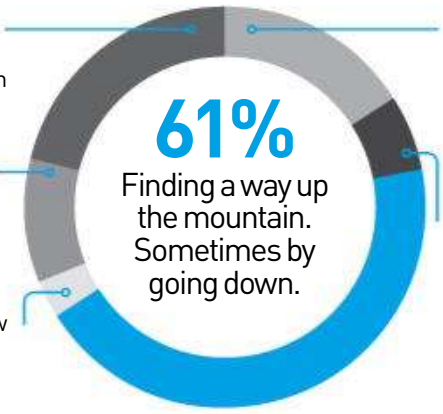
Jusant is an incredibly relaxing, often almost meditative experience. It lets you take your time to find your way, provides direction without being too obvious, and rewards successful climbs with beautiful vistas. Not only that; while you're almost entirely alone (a mysterious critter accompanies you), the Tower doesn't feel lonely. That's thanks to the lovely things you discover along the way, getting to know the people who created a home here through picking up leaflets, community postings, letters, and (gaming's favourite) logs. If you care to do a little collecting, you learn how the people of the tower discovered its unique flora and fauna, how they built communities, and how they tried to cope with increasingly harsh weather. These messages, including the logs of a woman named Bianca who goes to an expedition to the top of the mountain, are packed with details that make the deserted mountain come alive. Not everything makes sense, and the ending may feel a little abrupt, but similar to games like Journey, in Jusant the journey is the destination. And what a pleasant journey it is.

Takes a simple idea for activity and turns it into something special, thanks to immersive controls, a powerful sense of exploration, and great worldbuilding. **Malindy Hetfeld**

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: JUSANT



16% Letting your climber shake out their hand to regain some stamina.

7% Listening to your little friend comment on their surroundings like R2-D2.

2% Learning a new water-related greeting through a found letter.

10% Asking a magical friend for help with climbing or creating a path.

4% Putting one more stone on a stone tower that got left behind.

HOW TO... MANAGE YOUR STAMINA

If you keep an eye on your stamina meter, there is technically no way to run out, as pressing L3 will always replenish it a little. However, to make bigger climbs, you must either find a flat surface to stand on to have a rest or hook in at one of the generously placed mobile rope stations.

STATPACK

05
Mysterious stone mechanisms left behind by the tower's long-gone residents to find and activate as you make your ascent to the top.

0
Creatures that mean you any harm – you're safe here. Thanks to your rope, you can't even fall too far. Danger is not the point here.

20
Times you have to hug your small friend to earn a trophy. And if you don't have it by the end of the game, what on earth is wrong with you?

LOVING/HATING

WALL RIDE
It's satisfying to see a room full of climbing opportunities, knowing that you will conquer it and look down at the place you started from.

BRICK WALL
Not so much hateful as subtle to the point of uselessness: the wayfinding mechanism only gives you a *very* rough direction.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

We don't think anyone plays Death Stranding for the climbing, but if you do, Jusant might just suit you.

Jusant provides more of a direction than Sable, though the sense of discovery is lessened.

Jusant is beautiful in its own way, but nothing has ever made us as emotional as Journey did.

Teyon may be a repeat offender when it comes to bugs, but the shooting is simply a joy.

RoboCop: Rogue City

Did they fix everything?

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £49.99
ETA Out now
PUB Teyon
DEV Teyon
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10-12 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; footstep noise reduction; target outlines on/off

Someone at Teyon is having a lot of fun. Between the hair metal soundtrack, distressed neon, a villain with a passing resemblance to Alan Rickman, and liberal use of 'creep' and 'scumbag', delivered in RoboCop's trademark deadpan manner, this feels like a perfect use of the licence. And yet…

There's so much wrong with RoboCop: Rogue City, from haphazard framerates to stilted dialogue (lifeless mannequins delivering info-dumps), and borrowed, surface-level game design. In any other game the faults would add up to a killing blow, but with this licence, delivered with a genuine love for the source material it, well… *works*.

MURPHY'S LAW

The way RoboCop and his world are designed suit being worked into a videogame, and in a way, fit within Teyon's limitations. At times the game, running on Unreal Engine 5, looks beautiful, in a grubby, rain-sodden way, and when the shooting starts everything splinters, sparks, and explodes. Every chance to let rip with your Auto-9 needs to be seized. RoboCop is a mix of contradictions: the controls are stiff; our hero stomps slowly about the warehouses, sewers, and back streets of Detroit; you can blast enemies away with abandon and soak up damage; there's no cover fire or modern design to limit your destruction. So where's the challenge?

Well, that's not the point. RoboCop is a fan-service power fantasy with some on-brand black humour (drug dealers debate macroeconomics and radio ads serve up reasons to sell your kidneys), and just enough character levelling to alter how you can deliver the destruction.

The game takes place over a series of small explorable maps with side-quests and challenges to earn XP to spend on levelling aspects of RoboCop's systems, including armour, combat, and even psychology; this last one affects conversation outcomes, and so how characters' stories end; it's light-touch RPG stuff but adds spice to interactions.

The best levelling comes from tweaking the Auto-9; hidden in the levels are circuits to pin chips into, which alter the gun's performance. Everything good in RoboCop stems from how much fun it is to riddle the world with bullets, and those moments that recall the movies' leisurely relationship with murder and morality.

There's a lot here, from character levelling to gun modding, side-quests, and even crime scene analysis, but it's all *so* shallow. There are just enough ideas to keep you engaged between shootouts but never enough to immerse you fully in Old Detroit. But – and it's a huge *but* – the game just feels right, and everything comes together with some great writing that just about elevates RoboCop beyond its flaws.

> **Some moments recall the movies' leisurely relationship with murder and morality.**

RoboCop is dreadfully buggy but an obvious love for the licence plus some brilliantly realised shooting pushes aside any doubts you might have; it's just *fun*. **Ian Dean**

7 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £24.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Thunderful Publishing **DEV** Thunderful Group, The Station **PLAYERS** 1

SteamWorld Build

This fantastic series hasn't run out of puff

Has there ever been a bad Steamworld game? Thunderful has published two great metroidvanias (SteamWorld Dig 1 and 2), an ace turn-based strategy (SteamWorld Heist), and a fantastic deckbuilder (SteamWorld Quest). Now it's taken on the city builder, and while original developer Image & Form has been replaced by The Station for this latest SteamWorld, the results are characteristically terrific.

It starts simple, with you building a few worker residences and then putting your new robot friends to endless work. Soon after you head underground to plunder all the natural resources beneath, such as gold, rubies, and, er, filthy water (well, we suppose you can't drink rubies). As usual, all the little details are nailed, like the pleasant noises you hear when clicking a new part of your town into place, or the satisfying clinks of your bots mining away to make you richer.

MACHINE LEARNING

It's impressive how complex the game gets without feeling complicated at all. The difficulty curve ramps up so steadily, taking you through every new step so neatly, that eventually you're juggling an overground town *and* underground workforce with ease. It can get overwhelming, but it's the *good* kind of overwhelming that has you zipping around your town, looking for empty space to build more things you need, hopping to the train station to trade for resources, and making sure you have enough workers that are all satisfied. They *really* like their moonshine, which we guess is on us for making them work through Christmas.

Eventually you have built a massive city that started off as nothing but a few heaps of scrap, and it's wonderfully rewarding. Our ancient eyes would appreciate larger text and occasionally we get a little confused as to what to do, but the latter is usually due to personal stupidity. Always friendly and never patronising, Build is a fantastic entry point for new city builders, and anyone who wishes the genre was a little less confusing than playing 4D chess blindfolded.

> **Eventually you have built a massive city that started off as nothing but a few heaps of scrap.**

A fun story campaign teaches you everything you need to build a great time in yet another excellent Steamworld game. What genre will Thunderful nail next? **Abbie Stone**

8 PLAY

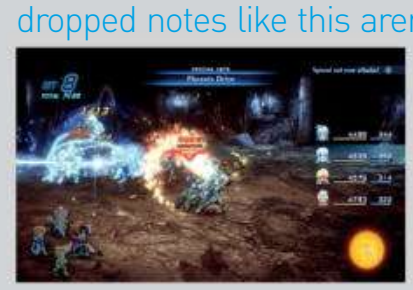
THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut. This month we're careening through space, and fighting fires in both literal and metaphorical senses, before letting the beat drop.

First things first, it's firefighting survival horror game **Quantum Error**. Aboard a research station out in the lonely void of space, someone forgot to carry the one; the facility is not only at the mercy of a raging inferno and attacks from a terrorist group, it's also facing an invasion from a horde of cosmic horrors. There's a cinematic sense of style to proceedings, with more than a few memorably morbid tableaus, but unfortunately the cutscenes can't save this one. While there's definitely *something* to the firefighting gameplay – the jaws of life become an unexpected melee favourite – too often this race against the flames is an aggravating slog between stingy checkpoints, filled with airhead enemy AI.

From the isolation of space to co-op mayhem – let's switch up the tempo and dive into **Super Crazy Rhythm Castle**. The zaniness may feel a touch try-hard for some, but between its banging soundtrack (the 30-plus tracks on offer include some from old Konami faves like Castlevania) and wealth of rhythm-based challenges, its occasionally groanworthy jokes can't keep us away from the dance floor. What's more, up to three of our friends can join in for a spot of co-op silliness. Everything unfolds at a breakneck, now-this pace, meaning that some levels require wonky-feeling trial-and-error activity, but even dropped notes like this aren't allowed time to fester.



Switching from earworms to legends, we're back among the stars for planet-trotting RPG **Star Ocean: The Second Story R**. This is an extremely loving 2D-HD-style remake of a still fondly remembered, exceptionally extra series entry – now with a number of quality-of-life improvements that shrinks the gap between its original '90s release and modern gaming sensibilities. Recruitable characters ensure you have plenty of options in combat, though this comes with the dissonance of party members you rely on hugely in battle standing awkwardly around on the sidelines when major plot stuff kicks off. Still, it's far from a star-crossed outing, and if you're an RPG fan you definitely shouldn't let it pass you by.

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06

NEW

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

07

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

08

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

09

Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

Cloud and the gang get a glow up with better visuals and slicker combat that Limit Breaks this bold reimagining of the Midgar section. Yuffie joins in with an extra story that bridges the gap between this and what's to come, cleverly playing on nostalgia and fan expectation.

10

NEW

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

12

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

13

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

14

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

15

Final Fantasy XVI

With a mixture of DMC-like action and a mature story peppered with wonderfully deployed regional slang (like 'nowt's) this reinvention feels fresh while also building on past entries' themes. Lacking quirky edges, it's almost too polished – but it's still a treat.

16

Astro's Playroom

Free and pre-installed on your PS5, this is more than a showcase for your new console's best, most innovative features. Astro's Playroom is a beautifully crafted, if short-lived, platform adventure that takes a tour through everything that makes PS5 so special.

17

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

18

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

19

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

20

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

21

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

22

EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

23

Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

A soulslike without stamina? It's just one of the many clever twists in this Ancient Chinese epic where qi governs your actions instead. Go on a tear, and positive energy (for you, not your dead foes) helps you keep the momentum going. Just don't let negative energy build.

24

Marvel's Midnight Suns

Mushroom-foraging friendship dates, a book club with Blade, and the Sorcerer Supreme's suspiciously small swimming trunks – this one's got it all. A deep affection for all things Marvel runs through this deck building RPG, and the writing and social mechanics charm.

25

Labyrinth Of Galleria: The Moon Society

Think outside the grid in this dungeon crawler. Break down the maze walls to reveal hidden chambers, jack up your party's attacks, and transfer cat skills into clowns (seriously) to master this devious RPG.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

Monster Hunter Rise challenges you to set out with friends to fell some truly intimidating beasts – that's if you can track them down. While few games can compete, if you're looking for something similar, we've got some suggestions for alternative ways to track your prey...

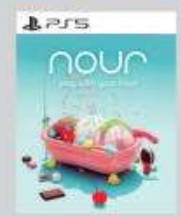
PICK #1

God Of War 3: Remastered

The harder they fall

During his time in Greece, Kratos wasn't known for emotional moments with his son and over-the-shoulder, one-shot camera direction. Instead, he was all about battling some of the biggest mythological bosses you ever did see, right up to Zeus himself. These fights are awe-inspiringly massive, and, while more character-action-based than MH's open-ended hunts, capture a similar sense of scale as you carve up mighty titans.

PICK #2



Nour

For the foodie in you

Find yourself obsessed with the food served up by the palico chefs? Then this arty indie may be for you, as it invites you to get lost in that obsession and play with your food in unique ways. More experience than game, each vignette has you generating new bits of grub, from mincing up jellybeans to making your potential bites float and dance around. Additionally, you can discover unique combos that create special effects. Have your cake, but you can't eat it.

PICK #3

Wild Hearts

Wood you like more?

Wait... EA made a Monster Hunter-like? Well, kind of – it partnered with Koei Tecmo, which made the excellent beastie-bashing Toukiden games. This once again has you tackling formidable foes and, like Rise, has a kind of 'feudal Japan' vibe. The twist comes in using woodpunk [*Is that a thing?* – ed] gadgets to change the battlefield in your favour, like giving you a vertical boost. While we're not expecting further updates, for MH-heads this rival is worth a look.

Ginormous hammers will always be at the top of the food chain.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13

Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24

Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25

Tekken 7: Definitive Edition

The title for best fighter on PS4 is fiercely fought over, but for our prize money King remains the, er, king. Easy to pick up, with plenty of depth, few fighters feel quite as crunchy as this. With all DLC characters now released, from Noctis to Negan, it's time to get sweaty.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen

£15.99, approx. (PS4, amazon.co.uk)

Not breaking the dragon's hoard

Yet to sup from the Dragon's Dogma chalice and wondering why everyone is out of their gourd for the upcoming sequel? You've still got plenty of time to dip into the definitive version of the original and find out what all the fuss is about for yourself. And believe us, you'll be in for a great time. A vast open world awaits, with plenty to discover under your own steam (waypoints are scarce), and tactile combat that has you hanging off huge beasts is both tense and slapstick. The sequel builds upon all these elements, so give this a go if you're curious.

UNDER £15

Scarlet Nexus

£14.99, approx. (PS5, ebay.co.uk)

Price cut and run

Yuito and Kasane are psionics in the brainpunk world of Scarlet Nexus, each ending up on their own side of a twisted and complex conspiracy that, while hard to follow, gives you plenty of excuse for tearing up freaky little mutant enemies. While their stories cross over, each has their own storyline that you can play in either order to get the full picture. They also each specialise in different psychic powers, meaning the slick, impactful combat remains interesting. Go for the PS5 version as the adaptive triggers make the finishing moves oh-so-satisfying to use.

UNDER £10

No Straight Roads

£3.95, approx. (PS4, gamecollection.com)

Tuning up

All music lovers will know that digital editions aren't enough. You need that nice pressing, something for that space on the shelf. Luckily, in the case of this rhythm action indie about overthrowing the EDM Empire using the power of rock and roll, this somewhat-limited physical edition is incredibly cheap. You play as both halves of Bunk Bed Junction, drummer Zuke and guitarist Mayday, whose quest to liberate Vinyl City has them laying down tunes against musical boss characters who each feature their own uniquely scored, large-scale battles.

Zuke and Mayday will have taken down some spectacular bosses by the time they're done.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01 Synapse

Telekinesis and guns make a wonderful combo in VR. With one mapped to your left hand and the other to your right, you feel like a conductor of chaos as you blast your way through a rogue colonel's mind to uncover secrets. Eye-tracking is wonderfully used to target your telekinesis, meaning you can slam enemies all over the place as you reload your arsenal. It's got a roguelite structure, so you'll keep coming back.

02 Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

03 Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You.* Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

04 Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

05 Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

06 No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

07 Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

08 Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

09 Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

10 Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

11 The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

12 The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

13 Jurassic World Aftermath Collection

Clever girls for a clever game. You're looking to salvage research data from the dino park's ruins and get out alive, all while being hunted by 'raptors (like the tense scene from the original movie). Other dinos pop up, but the velociraptors are the focus, for better and worse.

14 What The Bat?

With your arms transformed into baseball bats, you must progress through loads of minigames that take you through different periods in your life. A great way to get used to 1:1 hand-tracking, the zany challenges are only let down by a slight lack of variety.

15 Tentacular

Get *stuck* into this coming-of-age story where you play as an adopted sea monster finding their place in their seaside town community. Joy comes from playful, wholesome interaction, using your twisty appendages to grapple with problems and suckers to pick things up.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

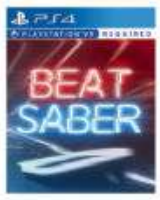
Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06



Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09

To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10

I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

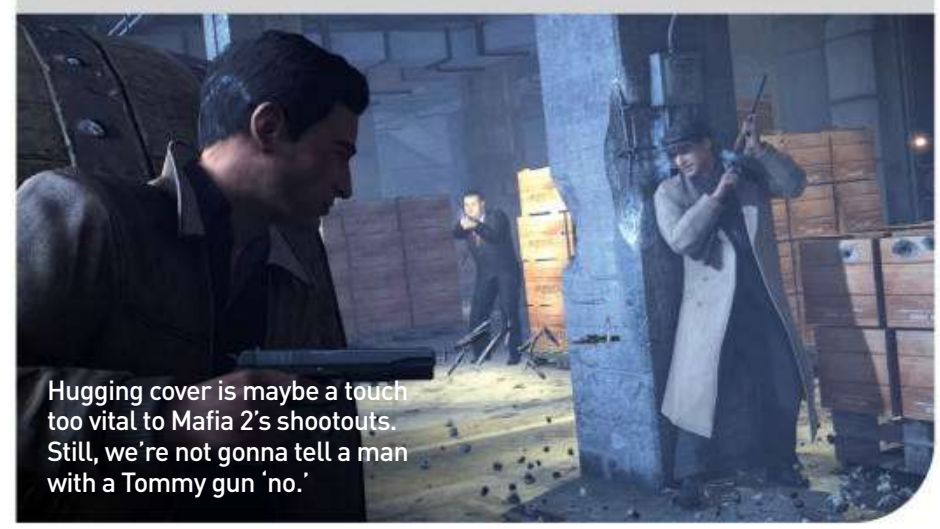
Let's say we blow this popsicle stand. November had the goods on PS Plus, offering **Aliens Fireteam Elite** on PS5 and PS4, and **Dragon Ball: The Breakers** on PS4. We knew it was only a matter of time for that latter offbeat online game – but that's not the wise guy we're here to discuss.

Following suit only on PS4 was **Mafia II: Definitive Edition**. Word on the street is that once upon a time this was a fairly mid third-person shooter, albeit one with a fantastic nobody-to-somebody mob story. Back in the bad old days of 2010, the original release on PS3 was let down by a largely unnecessary open world, unimaginative shooting, and a slew of technical issues including missing graphical details on PS4 that were present on other platforms.

A long old decade followed that release, and this 2020 remaster attempted to right at least a few of those wrongs. It's definitely a remaster, not a remake, and as such shows its age in terms of gameplay – but the vibes are *killer*. With post-war period-appropriate vehicles, licensed tracks, and more all presented with a fresh lick of paint, there's still an irresistible transportive quality to the world – however shortlived the game might be.

Pounding the pavements may not do it for you, but the tale of Sicilian immigrant and war veteran Vito Scaletta just might. Joining the army to avoid jail time, he witnesses the power of the mob firsthand during a FUBAR military operation in Sicily, when none other than Don Calò steps in. As far as impetus for embarking on a life of crime goes, we can't say fairer than that, though it's far from smooth sailing up the ranks.

This remaster and its inclusion in PS Plus makes it easier than ever to see for yourself if the journey's worth the effort (at the very least, it gives you an excuse to rewatch Goodfellas. *Funny how?*)



Hugging cover is maybe a touch too vital to Mafia 2's shootouts. Still, we're not gonna tell a man with a Tommy gun 'no.'

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 66

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RetroStation

107 Defending: Wander

He's a walking Meat Loaf lyric, and you have to respect that

HIGHLIGHTS

CLASSIC GAME: BASTION 104 | MEMORY CARD: RATCHET 2 VS JAK II 106
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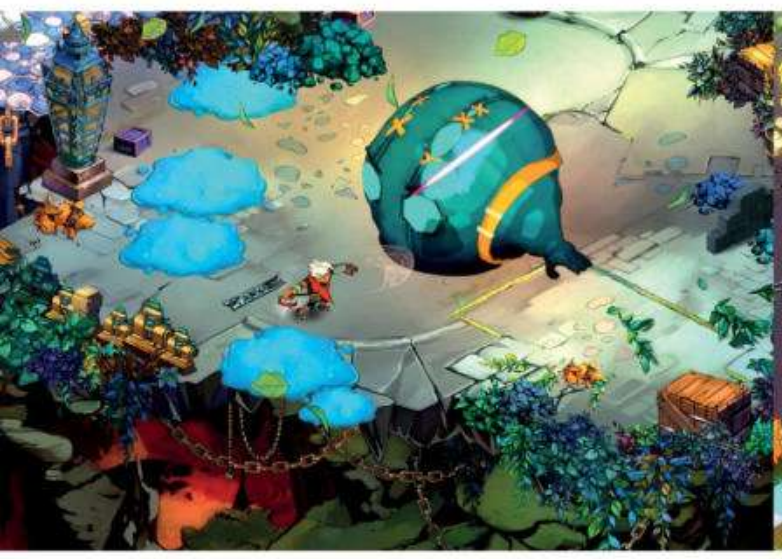
A BRIEF HISTORY OF... COSMIC HORROR 113 | PARTING SHOT: FINAL FANTASY XII 114

CLASSIC GAME

Bastion

Supergiant's narrated debut had plenty to say, but wasn't all talk



1 Knock down the petrified remains of inhabitants to hear who they once were. 2 Inky Squirt monsters sometimes spawn from old popcorn stands. 3 Collect cores to expand the Bastion and build new facilities. 4 This Anklegator, known as Queen Anne, likes to burst from the ground underfoot. 5 Optional trials tailored to each weapon reward you with upgrades.

These days, Supergiant Games is best known for Hades, but the studio's journey began with Bastion, in many ways a kind of spiritual predecessor to its smash hit. Like Hades, it's an isometric brawler and shooter at heart, but also like Hades it's the stuff going on around the action that makes it rather special. In this case, a self-building world and an ever-present narrator.

The titular Bastion is a place where everyone's supposed to gather in times of trouble, like a car park in a fire drill. But no-one in the made-up land of Caelondia expected trouble quite as extreme as the Calamity, an apocalyptic event that's caused much of the world to crumble away. As a kid known as, well, the Kid, you wake up to find your bedroom floating in a void, but fortunately as you begin to walk, chunks of the city start to reform around you. It's as if everything only pops back into existence when you're in the vicinity, which is a real boost to the ego but equally an easy way to keep track of where you've been.

Don't get too big for your boots, though, because soon enough monsters start to emerge, and respect for the Kid is not one of their defining qualities. Fighting back is straightforward at least, a matter of dodge and attack, at first wielding an impractically large hammer, then a repeating pistol that empties its payload all too fast. Next comes a shield that can block virtually anything, or rebound incoming projectiles and daze enemies that attack up close if you raise it at the right moment.

More weapons fall into your lap at a steady rate from there, including a bow, a machete, and an explosive-firing cannon, but once your inventory grows you're forced to make decisions, since you can only equip two (plus the shield) at any time. Naturally, each is more useful in some situations than others, and finding the right balance can make all the difference in overcoming critters and bulky bad boys. In time you find upgrade materials to bolster specific items in your arsenal, which might sway your choices a little. In any case, selecting the right tool for the job can be as important as how you use it.

BUILD BACK BETTER

Sadly, when you reach the Bastion there's not much of it left, and hardly anyone has reached the haven. The best you can do, then, is start to rebuild your new base, heading off to further-flung lands to acquire cores that restore the place to its former glory. It's a dangerous quest, but also a lush one, thanks to another of Bastion's qualities – a hand-painted visual style that brings unlikely beauty to a broken world. From understated beginnings in a town paved in white flagstone, there's wonderful colour to come in warm orange pathways and pea-green meadows. Even the murky swamp births some rather pretty plant life.

The real jewel in the crown of Bastion's presentation, however, isn't visual but audio. For starters, the soundtrack, a kind of frontier-industrial fusion, is worth a listen even if you don't play the game, especially its handful of vocal tracks. Yet one singer, Logan Cunningham (who later played Hades in the game of the same name), has an even more memorable role as Bastion's narrator, commenting on what's going on and what you're doing throughout with his laconic cowboy timbre.

Logan's smooth delivery is just one facet of a feature that's far less gimmicky than you might assume. It's an efficient means of worldbuilding for one, with lore parcelled out in tiny spoken morsels within the flow of the game. "Must have fled here from the mines," remarks the narrator as you encounter a mob little creatures known as Squirts, filling you in on their natural habitats. It can also work as a hint, like when the floor begins to crumble again, and you need to run rather than fight: "Kid has a feeling he better get a move on." Best of all, though, it makes you feel seen, as if the game is acknowledging your efforts. "Kid pops him good," chimes the narrator as you hammer your first enemy. "Fella got a piece of him though," he adds if you take damage in the process. Such interjections are used sparingly, adding flavour without becoming intrusive, and even today few games tell their stories in such style. ■

> **"Best of all, the narration makes you feel seen, as if the game is acknowledging your efforts."**

INFO

PUB Supergiant Games

DEV Supergiant Games

RELEASED 2015

GET IT NOW PS Store, £11.99

NEED TO KNOW

1 Originally released in 2011, Bastion didn't make it to PlayStation until 2015.

2 Logan Cunningham also voiced six roles in Hades.

3 Before Bastion, Supergiant's founders worked for EA on the Command & Conquer series.

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these Christmas moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

5 YEARS

God Of War swept the Golden Joysticks in 2018, winning PlayStation Game Of The Year as well as Best Storytelling, Visual Design, and Audio. There's a reason this awards juggernaut is so fondly remembered.

10 YEARS

Spend some time delving for minerals or just building to your heart's content in Minecraft and you'll know time can melt away (especially when playing with friends). The phenomenon landed on PS3 just in time to ensure a rather good end to the year.

25 YEARS

Every Christmas is a platformer Christmas. Five years before the events on the right, you'd be spending the holidays literally jumping through time in Crash Bandicoot: Warped, ND's jumpy send-off to the main PS1 series.

MEMORY CARD

Mascot Christmas

Twenty years ago, Jak and Ratchet sequels went head-to-head

Different approaches, but both sequels were ambitious (and both pulled it off!).

For PS2 owners in 2003, Christmas was immense. The years before had seen Naughty Dog's Jak And Daxter and Insomniac's Ratchet & Clank debut to acclaim, and both games' sequels had their sights set on '03's holiday period.

Which, for many, meant making a tough decision. Even if you were good enough (and well-off enough) to have a chance of finding both under the tree, you'd still have to indicate a preference for one or the other.

"Yeah! I always wanted to play Ratchet & Clank 2, but I did get [Jak II: Renegade] for Christmas and I played the mess out of it! One of the more difficult games that I have played," shares **Nichelle Johnson**. The dramatic shift from colourful collectathon to a grittier, GTA III-like open world structure certainly made it stand out (read more about that on p20). But it did result in some deviously tricky missions. Who can forget fleeing from that tank early on?

While some didn't like Jak II's darker tone, for others it was the right move, meaning there was little competition for the double bill. "Jak II was [a] masterpiece! Loved it, didn't try the other though sadly," shares **Jeffrey Sainz**. Though the neglect is being remedied: "Going through the Ratchet games now."

SCREWS LOOSE

Others prioritised the lombax and robot duo. "I remember getting Ratchet & Clank 2 when it came out for Christmas. I wanted Jak II, but I like Ratchet & Clank more," says **Kristopher Thompson**.

Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

INFO

PUB Sony

DEV Naughty Dog, Insomniac Games

RELEASED ON PS2

RELEASE 2003

IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
PS2's third mascot platformer series, Sly Cooper! Or PS5's Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart.

Ratchet & Clank 2: Locked And Loaded might not have had a big tonal shift, but it did introduce slicker controls that benefitted the even more explosive arsenal of ludicrous weaponry. There's a reason some readers are disappointed that while Jak's PS2 games are now PS4/5 native, Ratchet's PS2 trilogy isn't yet. For others, time flies. "Twenty years?! I am officially OLD" says **Gareth Williams**. You and us both!

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

3,000,000

Copies of R&C2 were reportedly sold by 2007, with Jak II sitting at 1.6 million in 2004 – similarly successful.

24

Guns in R&C2's hefty arsenal (discounting upgrades). Jak II had four, but it was a surprise it had any.

02

Titles. Jak II's 'Renegade' subtitle is EU-only; R&C2 is 'Going Commando' in the US.

DEFENDING

Wander

Justin Towell hears Meat Loaf, because the Colossus' killer would do anything for love

The clever thing to say may be: 'You play as the bad guy in Shadow Of The Colossus.' And sure, I get where you're coming from. Wander has gone against the orders of his people, brought the sacrificed body of his love, Mono, into a sealed, forbidden land, and awoken a sleeping god and done its bidding, murdering innocent colossi left, right, and centre. Good work, kid.

I could argue that he was tricked, but it wasn't really much of a trick. Dormin's disembodied voice tells Wander he may be able to reverse death if he does Dormin's bidding, but the price may be dear. As you progress, it seems that price is just Wander's health, but it gets much worse. Wander ends up basically looking like he's in a Billie Eilish music video.

But even though he can see it happening, with his skin deteriorating and black veins starting to show, Wander carries on. He is completely single-minded in his mission. He's going to bring back Mono from the dead even if it kills him. That? That's love. Unbreakable, tragic, blind love. The sort of love usually reserved for Shakespearean protagonists. And when it all goes wrong at the end, and he's been impaled, had his body 'borrowed' by Dormin, returned to human form corrupted and reduced to a literal shadow of his former self, tumbling inexorably towards an unknown fate, clinging on to the steps until the last ounce of his strength leaves his wretched frame, he is *still* looking towards Mono. All he wants is for her to open her eyes and breathe again.

Does the end justify the means? Objectively, of course not. One life in exchange for so many others. But was he ever selfish? I'd argue no. He did it all for her. Selflessly.

"PLEASE... I NEED YOU TO BRING BACK HER SOUL..."
"THE PRICE YOU PAY MAY BE HEAVY INDEED..."
"IT DOESN'T MATTER."

Maybe Metallica's 'Nothing Else Matters' rather than Meat Loaf. Basically Wander was born to embody rock ballads.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Shadow Of The Colossus

STATS
The PS2 original hit Japan four months before the Western release. An unbearable wait for those in the know.

A pre-release demo version featured a different secret garden complete with a headless body. Weird.

The PS2 original lets you stab the sand in the desert as though it's a Colossus' head. Nobody knows why.

SPIN-OFFS
Only the excellent PS4 remake.

HOW TO PLAY?
PS4 remake, PS Plus Extra game catalogue, free, or PS Store, £29.99; PS2 original, eBay, £8-£12

THE FEATURE

FORMAT PS2 / **RELEASED** 2003 / **PUB** SONY
DEV FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS / **GET IT NOW** FROM £6, EBAY (PS2)

PAW PATROL

The strange Dog's Life is unforgettable for many – **Andrew Gillett** tells Lex Luddy just what was going on with Frontier's bizarre platformer

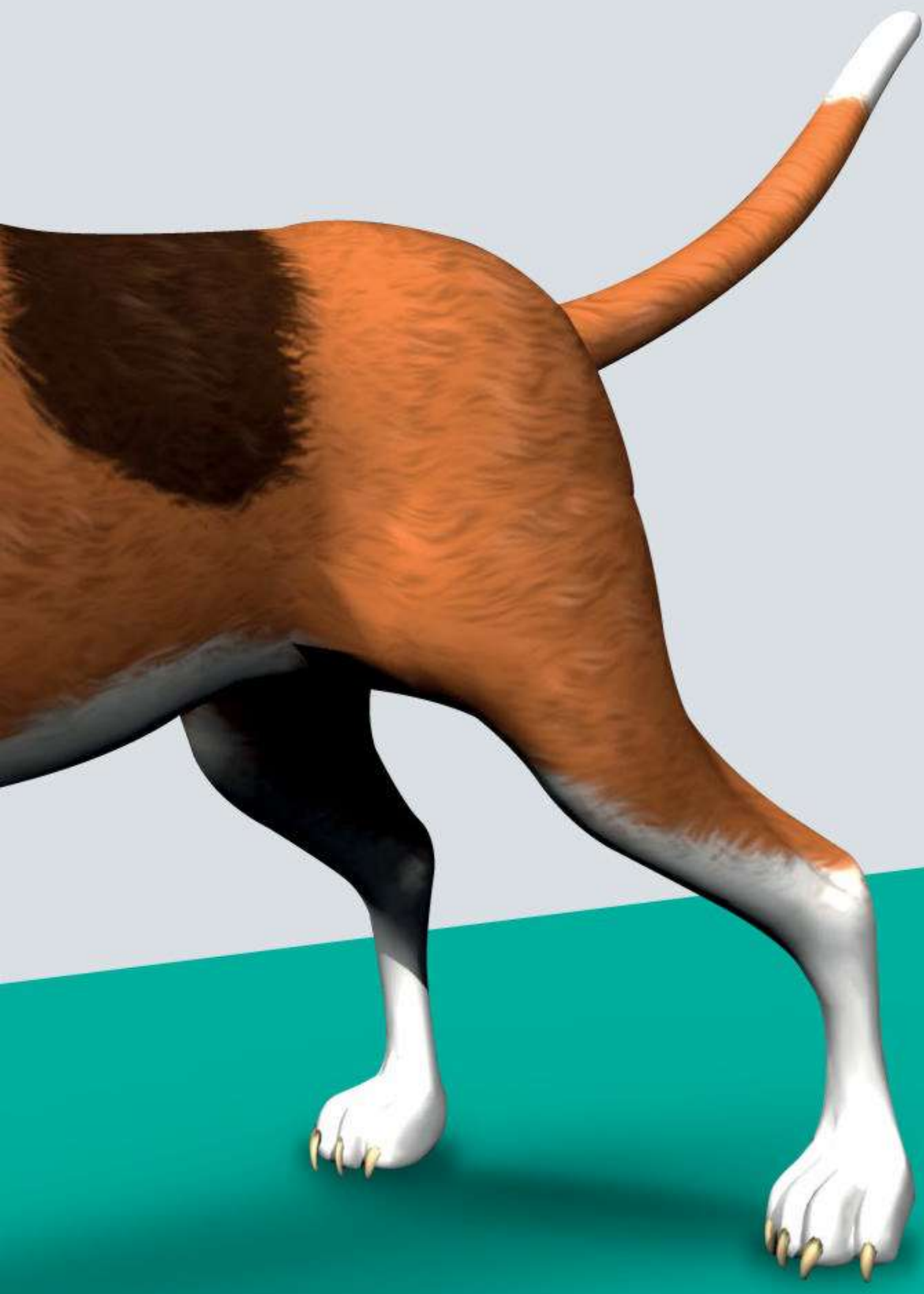
From the pioneering tech of Elite to the enduring timelessness of RollerCoaster Tycoon, Cambridge studio Frontier Developments has carved out an indelible mark on the industry. The studio was founded back in 1994, and almost 30 years later it is still working on games like F1 Manager, Planet Zoo and Coaster, and more. However, there was a time, around the release of PlayStation 2, when a lot of British studios were struggling. Companies were grappling with the leap from PC to console games, all while budgets grew exponentially.

A lot of UK studios shuttered during this turbulent period. However Frontier survived, partly thanks to the continued success of sequels to RollerCoaster Tycoon. Andrew Gillett joined Frontier during this tumultuous time; he moved across the country to join as a QA, but during his time with the company he's worn just about every hat from self-taught programmer to script writer.

As part of his job application he was brought in to look at Infestation, a PS1 game which didn't inspire a great deal of awe when he first saw it. "But I also remember seeing on someone else's screen this dog running around," says Gillett. "It was the last thing you'd expect at Frontier." That game was the long-gestating Dog's Life. It's a platformer released in 2003 where you play as Jake

Think you work like a dog? On PS2, you could play like one too.

> "I remember seeing on someone else's screen this dog running around. It was the last thing you'd expect at Frontier."



the dog. The catch was that Jake wasn't an anthropomorphic mascot platformer like Crash or Sonic. He was just a dog. He didn't walk on two legs, he didn't talk, and he definitely didn't spend his time saving the world. Instead he just did dog stuff in a sleepy American town.

DOING THE DOG

Living in a post-Stray world, a game where you play as a realistic animal probably doesn't sound that out there, but in 1998 (when Gillett estimates the project started) it was something that had never been done before. Gillett can't say for sure how the project began, but brings up that at some point David Braben, the CEO of Frontier and co-creator of Elite, got a dog called Gem. She and another developer's dog, Tigger, would spend most of their time under the team's desks (or in Gem's case, locked in another room of the converted farmhouse Frontier worked out of when publishers visited so she wouldn't bite anyone). At some point, though, the team started working on a "more realistic" dog game. However, PS1 wasn't powerful enough to make this dog sim; Gillett recalls finding a PS1 build of the game that he describes as "pretty ridiculous", thanks to its crude animations and rough draw distance.

The game was never actually cancelled, however. In fact, when the team started working with PS2 they had plans for an ambitious procedural animation system

that would help to make the game look more naturalistic."The trouble with this system," according to Gillett was, "it looked good when it worked, but often it didn't and just looked really bad."

The game's high concept seems to be the main thing that hurt Dog's Life when it launched. Nowadays an experimental game where you simply run around and vibe out as an animal sounds like it could get made and maybe even attract a publisher. But in the early 2000s, when Frontier poured resources into a project, eventually it had to become an actual game with things for players to do so the company could sell it.

> "Designing minigames presented challenges thanks to limitations imposed by the realistic style."

1

GOOD IDEA, BAD IDEA

Gillett says this didn't really happen until Sony came aboard as publisher. That's where "some of the direction came from [and] some of this more commercially viable stuff [was added]". This "stuff" included bringing in voice actor and writer Kerry Shale to rewrite what little script there was and give the game more of a story that'd see Jake heroically attempt to rescue his furry sweetheart, Daisy, from dastardly dognappers.

Some of these additions were developer-led and gave the game a shape. Originally the only way to progress was by making friends with different residents of each area. Ultimately, though, that wasn't much fun. Most of it was "bringing stuff to people," says Gillett, and while that wasn't uncommon for the time, "it wasn't super-compelling." So, instead, the game became a collectathon, where Jake would get bones for finding enough coloured scents in Doggie-vision, or completing minigames, with the occasional fetch quest thrown in. (Dogs *love* fetch quests...)

Designing minigames presented challenges thanks to limitations imposed by the realistic style. "[You'd] wrack your brains" to come up with what a dog does all day, shares Gillett, while also trying to make an animal that feels both realistic and fun to control for the player.

However, not every idea came from the team in Cambridge. Gillett mentioned two ideas of varying merit that were "*suggested*" to the team by Sony. The first is maybe what the game is most remembered for all these years later: in Dog's Life you can perform everyday dog actions if you hit buttons on the D-pad: press ↓ to sit; ↓↓ to lie down; ←→← to shake; and of course, ←→↓... to poo.

Gillett says this idea was floated to the team by someone at Sony, at which point Dog's Life producer Johnny Watts was extremely ambivalent to the idea. Gillett explains that Watts told the team, "We are going to put this in because Sony has asked for it... Obviously it will look stupid [but we'll show it to them and they'll agree]." However, it's hard not to admit it's pretty funny, especially since Jake can pick up his mess and toss it at poor unsuspecting NPCs. Nowadays Gillett even concedes, "Yeah, it was the right thing for the game."

Sony's other big suggestion was much less popular. The game's main character was originally called Gem, named after David Braben's publisher-hating good girl. However, by time the game shipped, he was named Jake. At some point in the course of getting to that name "One of the Sony producers suggested... naming the dog after himself." This did not happen.

Most interestingly, though, there are certain details no-one can seem to agree on, one of which is the nightmarish final level. After several hours of exploring small town America and befriending doggos and friendly NPCs, Jake finally

DOGGIE DO'S AND DON'TS

Dog's Life has lots of curiosities. Some are front and centre, some are fun secrets... Others are just strange.

Yes, this is a woman wearing a dress made entirely out of images of cats. Yes, it was Gillett's idea to make a jpg he found into the woman's dress texture. Fashion purrfection.

Dog's Life featured signs and vending machines plastered in Pedigree logos. Why? Well the best Gillett can guess is that, "People were trying to see 'Does this make money?'"

Take a break from herding sheep out in the Big Field and you may see Gillett himself hidden away, a texture of his face being used for a character in a hot air balloon.

1 Could Jake's sensitive nose be a precursor to 'detective vision' mechanics? 2 Just wait until you see how they react when you start pooping. 3 Gillett shared this picture of Tigger, seen here being a good boy in the Frontier office. 4 A peek behind the curtain at Gillett's important game development documents. (He'll be sharing more of them on archive.org). 5 Each of the game's large stages is varied and full of interesting spots – there's still a lot to appreciate here.

catches up with the dognappers... and things take a turn (roll, sit).

A DOG'S NIGHTMARE

This final level feels like it came from a cancelled Silent Hill game and not a kid's platformer. You arrive at Ms Peaches' cat food factory, which for some reason is a gothic mansion in a barren field, where the sky is crimson and haunting music plays. Things only get worse when you get inside and it turns out Ms Peaches' cat food is made of dogs, and this is where they're slaughtered. Then the level sees you racing to turn off industrial machinery before it can hurt Daisy, and the game ends with you knocking Ms Peaches into one of the machines (by farting in her face), which spits out several cans, as a voice declares "Ms Peaches. Is. Cat food."

Gillett says that (contrary to what you might read in some coverage) he didn't come up with idea for the climax and he doesn't know who did. However, he does mention that "[the developer who did] the graphics for that level apparently used to work in an abattoir."

It's hard to blame Gillett for wanting to distance himself from the level, which was cut from the Japanese version, especially when he recalls, "We got a letter after the game came out from a dad, who said, 'My kids keep crying because we can't finish the final level and we can't save the dog.' They kept dying."

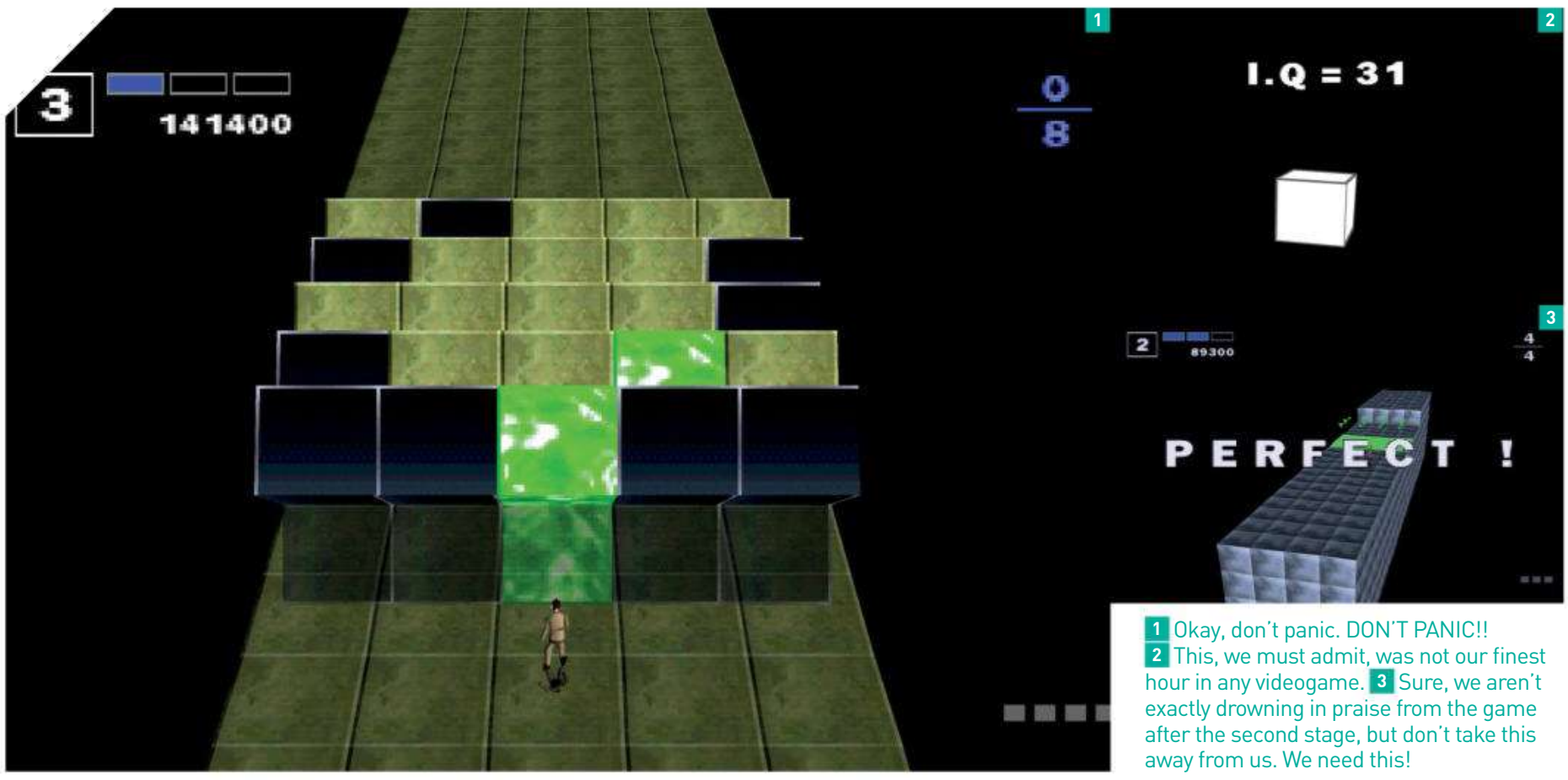
Ultimately, Dog's Life isn't great. It's hard to control, it's repetitive, and its voice acting is hard to go back to. However, it's an important part of an important studio's history.

Today, Frontier has several hundred employees, with David Braben still CEO. "There were 16 employees when I started," says Gillett. And they may not have been on the payroll, but those dogs counted too.

PLUS POINTS

Kurushi Final: Mental Blocks

Watch out, or there'll be new blocks on the kid



1 Okay, don't panic. DON'T PANIC!! 2 This, we must admit, was not our finest hour in any videogame. 3 Sure, we aren't exactly drowning in praise from the game after the second stage, but don't take this away from us. We need this!

Some puzzle games are easy. Some are difficult. This one puts us in mind of one of the Greek myths in which a vengeful god subjects a mortal to eternal punishment.

You control a little guy[1] on a platform within a void, threatened by the approach of huge blocks for, we assume, eternity. The trick is to avoid getting squished by getting rid of these blocks one at a time (or within a small grid if you capture and activate one of the special green blocks). Don't capture any black blocks, or let any of the others fall over the edge! If you do, the size of the play area shrinks, until your inevitable failure which triggers the whole experience over from the beginning. Zeus only knows what your character did to deserve this.

GOOD GRIDDANCE

Its simplicity has allowed the game to age very well, so the creaky PS1 graphics offer no barrier to your enjoyment. It's difficult, though. There are a few modes, and none are interested in making life easy for you.[2]

Now, this is presented to you via the magic of emulation. You *could* cheat by rewinding. You *could* bypass the intended difficulty somewhat by employing the save system. You *could* do both. We're not saying you should; just putting it out there. You do you.

INFO

PUB Sony Computer Entertainment
DEV G-Artists
RELEASED 1997

FOOTNOTES 1 You can unlock more characters (including a dog). **2** To add insult to injury, Final mode gives you an IQ score every time you fail. There's a trophy for getting 500 or more!

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"WHAT A BRUTAL GAME"
Carl Robinson

"WOULD REALLY LIKE KULA WORLD NEXT"
Makasa Mwenya

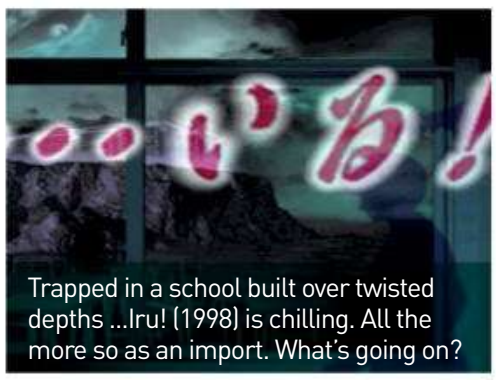
"NEVER HEARD OF THEM BEFORE NOW."
Dustin Nichols

▷ You gotta believe in **PaRappa The Rapper 2** on PS Plus!

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

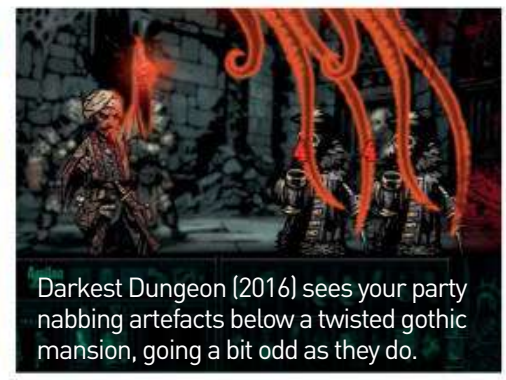
Cosmic Horror

The forbidden history of these unknowable games



Trapped in a school built over twisted depths ...Iru! (1998) is chilling. All the more so as an import. What's going on?

Horror JRPG Shadow Hearts (2001) has you stopping medieval scholar Roger Bacon from summoning an alien god.



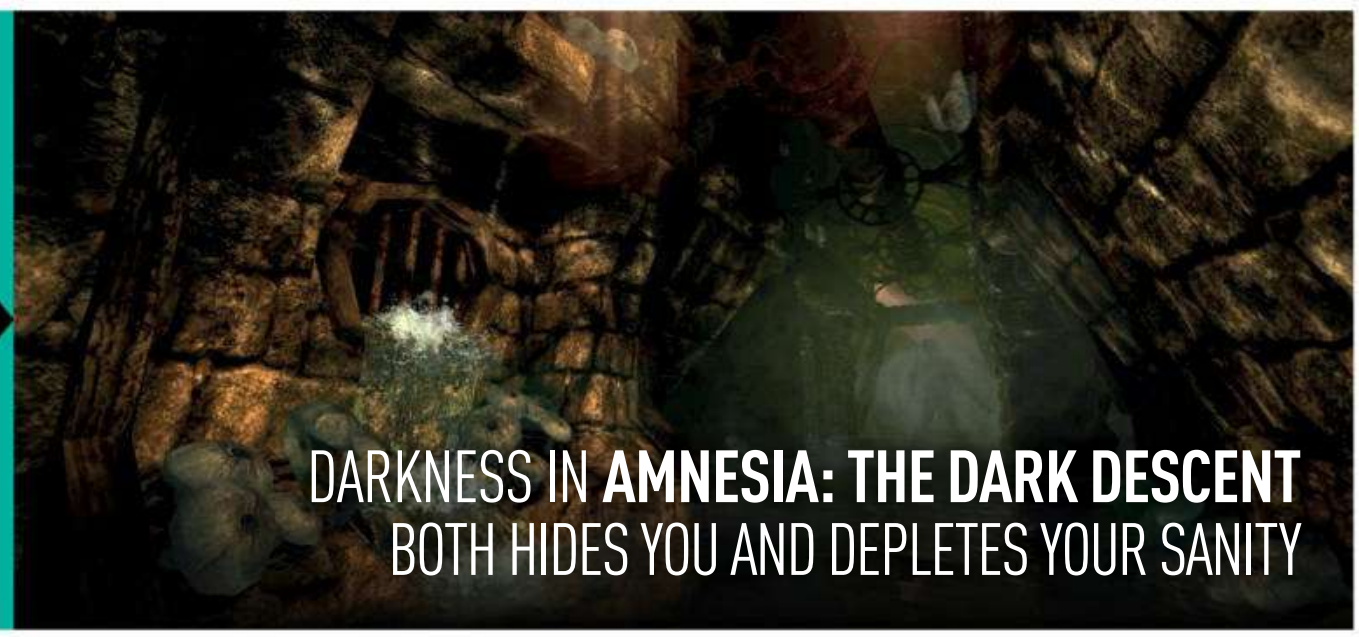
Darkest Dungeon (2016) sees your party nabbing artefacts below a twisted gothic mansion, going a bit odd as they do.

Defunct MMORPG The Secret World featured Lovecraftian conspiracy (among others). The Japan-only PS1 port of adventure game Prisoner Of Ice used rotoscoping. **MagRunner: Dark Pulse took the Cthulhu mythos cyberpunk on PS3.**

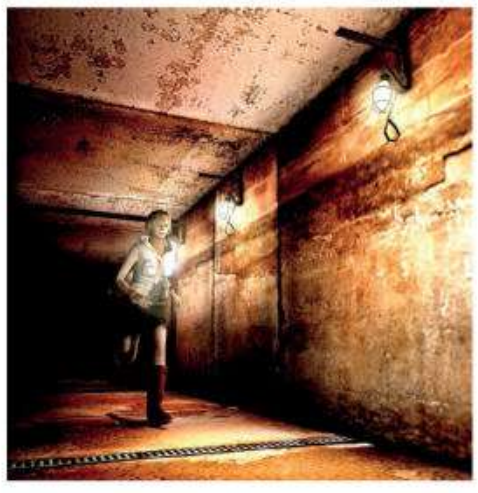
ALL ALONE

Influential terror

In Amnesia: The Dark Descent (which came to PS4 in 2016), you wander ancient halls, defenceless but for a lantern. While you juggle sanity with avoiding stalking terrors, your limited abilities make it all the more immersive (try playing with headphones at night, we dare you). It went on to inspire a deluge of similar horror games, including a whole series of its own.



DARKNESS IN **AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT** BOTH HIDES YOU AND DEPLETES YOUR SANITY



With forbidden texts, strange gods, and more, Silent Hill 3 (2003) is unnerving.

Song Of Horror (2020) features random, shifting, unknowable threats.

Frogwares' detective action went cosmic in The Sinking City (2019), tasking you with solving impossible cases. No problem!

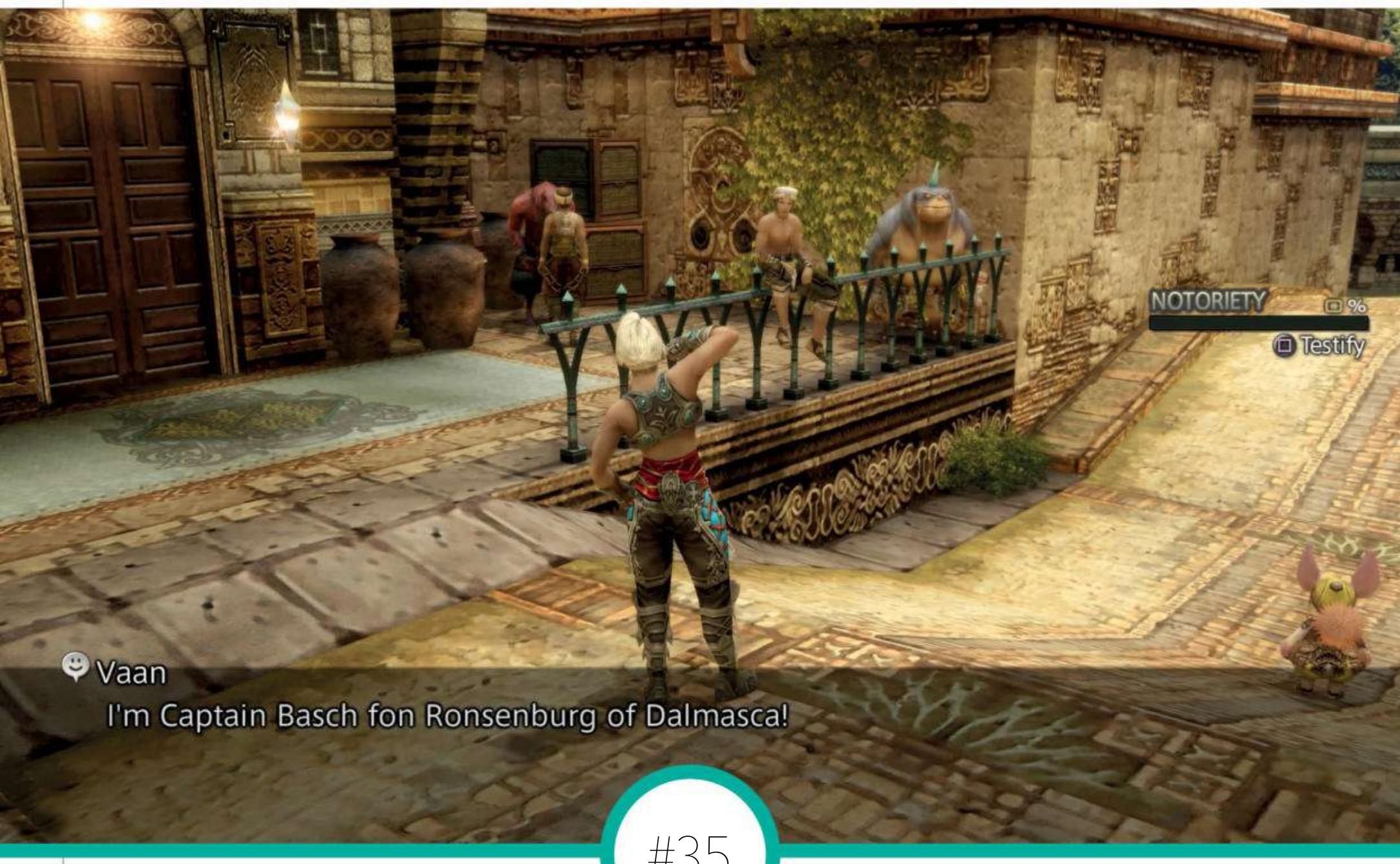
Alone In The Dark: The New Nightmare (2001) has you shining a torch on reptile creatures invading from a primordial, deadly underground world.

OLD BLOOD

It's thicker than stardust

Few games can effectively match gripping combat with cosmic horror. Yet Bloodborne (2015) manages it, thanks to impeccable visual design that ensures fresh horrors lay in wait in huge, maze-like cathedrals and cities; and by making these creepy bosses from beyond absolute brick [blorp!]houses who'll mess you up.

▷ Next issue: hitting the track with the history of **Gran Turismo**



#35

The Basch street kid

A cunning plan in **Final Fantasy XII**, as an unconvincingly youthful Vaan poses as Captain Basch

FORMAT PS4, PS2 / **PUB** SQUARE ENIX / **DEV** SQUARE ENIX / **RELEASED** 2006

Most of the time in Final Fantasy games you can overcome an obstacle by fighting it, but occasionally actions *don't* speak louder than words. That's certainly the case when the FFXII gang reach the Skycity of Bhujerba and need to meet the Marquis Ondore. With no invitation forthcoming, they hatch a daft yet effective plan.

Your crew at this stage consists of street urchin Vaan, sky pirates Fran and Balthier, and Captain Basch. The latter was supposedly executed for killing the King of Dalmasca a couple of years back (actually, his twin brother did it), but you find him left to rot in a cell and let him loose. Now since the Marquis – who's secretly funding a rebellion against the evil Empire – was the one to announce Basch's death, he would be somewhat embarrassed if Basch turned up alive. So, spread a rumour that the condemned captain is indeed still kicking, and that'll get his attention, right?

Rather than have Basch simply show his face around town, the party decides that he should put his feet up while Vaan runs about the streets yelling, "I'm Captain Basch!" at gaggles of traders and bemused moogles. Each time the youthful Vaan spouts his lie a little notoriety meter increases, and once it maxes out, the rebels escort Vaan to their hideout for questioning. Basch follows and reveals his true identity to the resistance leader, who has a line of communication with the Marquis. Success. Why they didn't cut out middle man Vaan, though, is anyone's guess. ■

TIME TO PLAY? You should arrive in Bhujerba around six to eight hours into Final Fantasy XII, once you get hold of Balthier's ship, the Strahl, which allows you to fly to the floating city. Once there, you'll take a trip into the mines before this shouty interlude.

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE 09 JANUARY

2023 GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS

The votes are in! Discover the best games of the past year

PLAY

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